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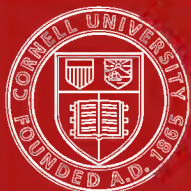
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THE
HOME OF THE SEVEN DEVILS

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

NOVELS

THE RED ROSETTE
THE WIFE
THE SQUARE MILE
SPARROWS
THE LONELY LOVERS
CALICO JACK
THE SINS OF THE CHILDREN
THE SOCIALIST COUNTESS
THE EALING MIRACLE
PANSY MEARES
A "YOUNG LADY"
THE HOME OF THE SEVEN DEVILS

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MR. FITZ W——
A LABOUR OF LOVE
THE ETERNAL MASCULINE
GENTLEMAN JACK
AN IDEAL
SEMIRAMIS
A STROKE OF BUSINESS
(WITH ARTHUR MORRISON)
FOUR DUOLOGUES

THE HOME OF THE SEVEN DEVILS

A ROMANCE

BY HORACE W. C. NEWTE

AUTHOR OF

"SPARROWS," "PANSY MEARES," "A 'YOUNG LADY,' " ETC.



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THE HOME OF THE SEVEN DEVILS

CHAPTER I

FRIAR ANSELM

FRIAR ANSELM sat in the refectory of the Franciscan Convent of St. Bernardine at Ypres.

It was after the midday meal, of which he had eaten little—an abstinence that had not been shared by many of those who had sat down; and once again his thoughts took the road they had been seeking all too often of late.

Just now, however, they were interrupted by the voices of a priest and a student, who, with rags tied to the end of short sticks, were washing up, in the kitchen near by, the recently used crockery. This duty was performed in turn, and it having been announced on the previous Friday that, for the following week, Father Antony and Brother David were *lavabunt scutellas*, the twain were hard at work, and, according to custom, were alternately chanting verses of the Miserere.

To-day the heat of the water scalded their fingers, and gave rise to ejaculations of pain which were violently at issue with the burden of the psalm.

For instance, Father Antony would recite:

“Amplius lava me ab iniquitate mea: et a peccato meo munda me,” and cry: “Curse this confounded water!”

“Quoniam iniquitatem meam ego cognosco: et peccatum meum contra me est semper,” chanted Brother David, who added: “To blazes with who heated it!”

“Tibi soli peccavi et malum coram te feci: ut iustificeris in sermonibus tuis, et vincas cum judicaris.” “Ten

thousand devils ! It's got me again !" returned Father Antony.

Their duties done, the voices ceased, and Friar Anselm was sadly aware he was once more enabled to reflect in peace—sadly, since he knew only too well that his unquiet thoughts were not of apiece with his vocation.

At recurring intervals, and for some time now, he had been the victim of a depression that had ruthlessly fastened upon his mind ; under the influence of this melancholy his days seemed " flat, stale, and unprofitable," and of no account whatsoever.

This morning he had been more than commonly weighed down by this sense of the emptiness of things, and in striving to make headway against this belief he felt he was fighting a losing battle.

For no reason at all that he could see his heart was bitter with discontent. On trying his hardest to sweeten his thoughts and direct them into orthodox channels, he might have succeeded for a while, had not the sunlight burst through the clouds that had withheld its glory and rioted in the refectory and in the hidden places of Brother Anselm's being.

He was imaginative and susceptible to intangible influences. After his coming to Ypres he had awakened in the night, and it had seemed that the grass-grown squares and streets of the once world-famous city had again echoed to the tramp of the rival hosts of the Great French King and the renowned British Captain ; that the trumpet calls of these armies troubled the tumbled roofs.

Now it was springtime, and with a consciousness of guilt Friar Anselm's quick fancy moved to remote lands (he had noticed a like aberration in other years at this season) where he would have liked to have been in the flesh ; and since this was impossible, he found himself picturing the appearance and ways of their several inhabitants.

Presently it turned towards England, and more particularly to the home of his youth, which had been in a fold of the Sussex downs — downs now dotted with islands of yellow gorse. His mind's eye dwelt lovingly (still with a sense of wrong-doing which somehow made the

presentment the more vivid) on the spread of wind-swept spaces; the woods in the hollows, which were now discreetly gay with primroses and fragile anemones; and on a spot he loved most of all, that was sweet with a long, low mist of bluebells. He heard the song-thrushes in the trees singing to their nesting mates; the stir of young life in bush and hedgerow. Friar Anselm stifled a sigh.

Next, he saw the interior of the home, with its rambling staircases and surprising nooks, its panelled walls, and old furniture; more than anything else, he was sensible of the love that had made it a holy place.

His father was the late General Quillian, V.C., D.S.O., a distinguished, God-fearing soldier, a member of one of England's old Roman Catholic families whose life had been inspired by love of and duty to his country, that, in his simple way, he had believed blessed by Providence for high endeavour and noble ends.

He had married a fair woman, who was a fit mate for himself. It had been a love match, and the only offspring of their union had ever been deeply sensible of their abiding tenderness for each other, which, as with a good fairy's wand, had touched the ways he had walked at home.

Of an evening, and for so long as they had been spared to each other, they had, if it were fine enough, walked in the garden, and had watched the sunset with linked arms.

Friar Anselm often recalled, as now, an old-fashioned song his mother used to sing at the piano; it was called "Primrose Farm," and the first verse was as follows:

"She sat at quiet Primrose Farm
In the old oak parlour dim,
While out of the window one little arm
Leant down the flow'rs to trim.
He opened the wicket; he loved her so;
He asked her his bride to be.
'There was someone else,' she answered low;
And her tears fell silently.

"For some must love, and some must wait;
And some must find their love too late."

And as she sang this homespun sentiment the eyes of her soldier husband, who had many times looked into the face of death, would fill with tears.

Friar Anselm reaching the age of fourteen, his mother had died almost suddenly, and two months later had been followed to her grave by her husband, who had pined away at losing his dearly loved companion.

The boy, who had an unusual depth of affection for one of his slender tale of years, had been much affected by his loss, and in his extremity had come under the spell of one of the Fathers at the Roman Catholic school at which he had been educated. He had eagerly listened to the promise of the spiritual joys provided for those who took religious vows.

His impressionable nature had been influenced in spite of himself, and the expediency of taking further thought on such a momentous matter had been overborne by the necessity of finding healing for the wounds his double bereavement had made in his heart.

He had spent the usual time in one of the "Seraphic" seminaries, where he had done well and delighted his superiors by his diligence and docility. Following upon the customary period of novitiate, he had taken vows at the age of nineteen.

Friar Anselm's thoughts incontinently wandered from his home to the interests immediately about his birth-place—to those who were watching sheep and tending lambs in the fold; to men who were delving in the fields or who went down to the sea in ships; to the many who set about their business, their minds occupied with their doings and the dear ones at home.

Some of these loved ones taking on the complexion of those whom it was sin for the mind of such a one as Friar Anselm to dwell upon, he, with something of an effort, made his thoughts concern themselves with things of the spirit. These appeared nebulous just now, and he wished he were kneeling in his stall of the chapel where he spent so many hours in prayer, praise, and meditation, and where, more than any other place, he was all but free from unseemly suggestion.

He crossed himself and prayed for succour, and in the twinkling of an eye it was as though his prayer had been heard.

His imagination surrounded him with the familiar

chapel walls, which were pierced by world-famous stained-glass windows. One of these, placed above the high altar, contained a representation of that fair sister of the Seraphim, St. Teresa, who had sought to suffer martyrdom for the Faith: she was depicted as a coldly beautiful woman.

He had often gazed with rapt adoration at this during "Matins and Lauds," as the breaking of the day had, as it were, slowly called her to life, and the newly risen sun had suffused her with a greater glory; and had pleaded for her intercession with the Most High. Now he again appeared to dwell on the chastened nobility of her face, and even as he did so the Prince of Evil was surely laying siege for his soul, for, once more, and this time violently, his heart was inclined to the ways of secular men and women.

Conscious of how he was erring and straying, Friar Anselm once more bowed his head in prayer: he beseeched forgiveness for his fault, and vowed amendment and penance.

But although his spirit was willing enough, the flesh was passing weak upon that April afternoon.

It was not that he was held by a barely acknowledged desire for the material things of this life so much as by certain other matters which of late had more or less fastened on his mind.

For all the seclusion the monastery offered, echoes of the outer world had reached his ears. Perhaps the most considerable of these was the report that the position of his native England was threatened by a redoubtable foe, who was ruthlessly making preparations to depose her from her high estate, and grasp in its mailed fist the sceptre of the sea on which the hand that had held it so long appeared to be weakening its hold.

Should he think on this dire possibility, in spite of the nature of his vows, he was minded (it must have been his father's blood in his veins) to bear no mean part in the titanic struggle looming ahead, and to quit himself like a man.

He had heard—and it had been spoken of by the better informed among the Friars—that too many of his countrymen were either sunk in sloth or too engaged in the bitter

struggle of bread-winning to give heed to those who foretold disaster unless a mighty effort were made, and that right speedily; that the politicians who had the ear of the people were too intent on huckstering for votes and occupying places of profit and influence to tell those to whom they were responsible a tithe of the truth.

And as he pondered these things he was seized by a longing for freedom, so that he might go into the by-ways and hedges of industrial life, and with honesty of conviction and singleness of purpose make unwilling ears hearken.

Nor was this all.

There had also come to him a shadowy knowledge of the unrest that was filling men's minds—an unrest which menaced the foundations of social life as it was, which threatened to throw a civilization that was the result of thousands of years of ceaseless effort into the melting-pot, and destroy the ordered fabric of life.

In thinking of this contingency he did not condemn off-hand those whose voices were a trifle loudly raised in order to impeach the possession by the few for the undoing of the many; he had an intuitive pity for, and sympathy with, the dumb millions who ploughed and sowed that others might reap, and who laboured with the sweat of their brow for those who did neither toil nor spin.

As it was with his desire to shed his blood in his country's service, so it was with his acquaintance with the existence of the widening gulf which separated the haves from the have-nots.

He was eager in his present mood to seek out things for himself, and, so far as he was able, to let all men know of the duty one owed to another, since they were the spiritual children of the One Supreme Father.

Even the impregnable rock on which his Church was founded was not immune from peril, for he knew, from the stoutness with which what was called "Modernism" was combated, that the more liberal ecclesiastical doctrines for which it stood were percolating into the stone on which the vast system of Roman belief had been reared.

Now, as at other times when seized by worldly concerns, he chafed at his impotence, and was minded to compare

his present and future lot with the strenuous days which might have been his.

From five in the morning, the hour he was awakened by a friar knocking at his door with a wooden hammer and greeting him with "Laudeter Jesus Christus" (to this he responded more or less sleepily "Amen"), to the time he went to rest in his meagrely furnished cell, the day was filled by various sections of the "Office" performed in chapel, and what all too often now appeared to be pointless devotional exercises and meditations.

The only keen mental exercise he got was from the academic debates which sometimes took place between the representatives of other monasteries, and although in these he more than held his own, he knew in his heart of hearts that these discussions amounted to the finest of hair-splitting and the most meticulous chopping of straws.

He was loth to admit, but was none the less aware, that, on the whole, the monastic life presented great opportunities for idleness. As if to confirm this impression, he glanced at those who were immediately about him in the refectory.

They were good, well-meaning men of divers nationalities (French and Flemish predominated); despite the fact that this was the time set apart for pious meditation, many of them were dozing after their meal.

It seemed to Friar Anselm, in his present inquiring frame of mind, that here was a waste of sterling manhood; and the thought thereupon occurred to him, and was almost as quickly suppressed, that this lifelong seclusion and devotion to things of the spirit in order to win salvation in the life to come, however praiseworthy it might be, was in the nature of a cowardly shunning of the rough and tumble of the world that seethed without the monastery walls.

And if it were true that all wealth were the result of labour, and of the consequent wearing down of the poor, it followed that the most praiseworthy of religious houses could not other than sustain the reproach of being parasitic.

Friar Anselm was seized with a knowledge of the sinfulness of such thoughts; he strove to put them away,

and in so doing told himself that he was doubtless all wrong, and that were he free of the monastery, he would speedily find out how mistaken he had been, and would long to get back to the blessed peace of the friary.

But there lingered in his mind the reflection that he wished he had not been taken so young.

The bell called him to "Vespers," and during this last section of the "Office" his mind was bitter with self-examination and self-reproaches for his unorthodox leanings.

He was leaving the chapel for tea when he felt a touch upon his shoulder.

He turned quickly, and saw one of the lay brothers beside him.

"Father Anselm!"

"Yes."

"The Guardian would have word with you."

"The Guardian!" exclaimed Friar Anselm in surprise.

"Even now. He awaits your coming."

Wondering what such an unexpected summons could mean from the Superior of the monastery, and searching his conscience for any sins of omission or commission he might have committed, and for which he was to be reproved, Friar Anselm hastened into the presence of the Guardian, where, with bowed head, he reverently knelt at his feet.

The Superior of the monastery was very large, very fat, and had staring eyes, a big mouth, a rudely chiselled nose, and looked like a grossly carved heathen idol. He was very able, very learned, very worldly-wise, and, in spite of this capacity and knowledge, was deeply pious; and was addicted to snuff. He commanded the love and veneration of all who were committed to his charge.

Friar Anselm waited for his Superior to speak.

The latter laid his hand on the head of the kneeling figure, and said:

"My son!"

He was a master of many languages, and spoke in French.

"My Father!"

"What is it that troubles thee?"

The more intimate personal pronoun by which he was addressed gave Friar Anselm heart.

"My Father!" he exclaimed, and with an inflection of surprise in his voice.

"Seek not to conceal thy thoughts. I have watched thee much of late, and have seen how you have been sorely troubled."

Friar Anselm lowered his head.

"Is it not so, my son?"

"It is even so, my Father."

"Know you what it is?"

"I fear it is a subtle device of the Evil One, my Father."

"And a very old one at that. You are suffering, my son, from an ailment of the mind that assails those like ourselves who have taken vows to God, even as it attacks those who live to gratify the flesh. Have you never heard of 'Accidie'?"

And before Brother Anselm could so much as reply, the other went on:

"'Tis a trouble known to medieval moralists. Cassian and St. Thomas Aquinas have each of them much to say of this 'Acedia,' to give it its Latin name. And this sickness of the soul is by no means peculiar to those times. I myself have not altogether been free from it."

"My Father!"

The Guardian took a pinch of snuff and went on:

"It comes to all of us at some time in our lives, although, perhaps, with you it may take the form of being the last cleaving to the world and its ways before surrendering to the perfect peace which may be yours. What think you, my son?"

"It is even as you say, my Father. My soul has been sick, and—and—my heart has sometimes clave to the things of the flesh."

"'Tis not altogether surprising, my son. Thou art young, and come of a race to whom action is as the breath of its nostrils; and for all thy prayer, abstinence, and fasting, perchance it is not this 'Accidie'; the Spring may be in thy blood, and urges thee to rebellion against the lot that thou hast chosen!"

For answer, Friar Anselm's head almost touched the Guardian's feet.

"Perchance I have read aright. And at such times it is in thy heart to bear thy part amongst the children of men. Is this not so, my son?"

"It is so, my Father. I confess my fault, and will strive to make amends, and will do even as thou dost command."

"Nay!"

"My Father!"

"Nay, nay!"

"Didn't thou say——"

"It is well."

"My Father!"

"It is well. And if you will give me heed, I will explain. Listen well to all I have to say, and after you have left me, ponder deeply on what I shall have told you."

Friar Anselm wondered if he had heard aright; he waited with all his ears to learn the nature of the tidings the Guardian had for him—tidings which, apparently, did away with the necessity of doing penance for his sin.

The good Guardian took another pinch of snuff, and presently said:

"'Tis well thy heart inclines to the world of men—and in this we see the all-wise hand of Providence—for if, after prayer and meditation, you resolve to follow a road that you may be permitted to tread, thou canst have thy fill and more of the ways of the unrighteous."

"Even so, my Father, I will follow thy counsel."

"Know you the name of Fowler-Fenning?"

"He was my father's first cousin, my Father."

"A man of great substance and a devout Catholic?"

"Even so, my Father."

"He is dead; and by a chapter of accidents, you, my son, inherit his estate."

"My Father!"

"I have said."

"Thou knowest full well I can hold no goods or wealth. What I have, thou hast, my Father, and the Brethren of our Order."

"Not in this case, for the property is entailed," de-

clared the Guardian, and with a justifiable suggestion of regret in his voice.

"Then, my Father, I can renounce my inheritance, and it can be bestowed on him who comes next in blood."

"That cannot be."

"My Father!"

"That cannot be, and 'tis why I have sent for thee. If you give up that which is rightly yours, the money—and it is much, as such things are counted by those who value that which moth and rust doth corrupt—goes to thy cousin, John Avondale. He is a declared enemy of the Church, and all the good works thy late cousin's piety planted and watered with his beneficence would be as a thing of naught; and in these days of the Devil's quickened activities, 'twould be a grievous thing if his hands were strengthened for evil."

"Then what do you command, my Father?"

"Thy and my Superiors at Rome have taken counsel on the matter, and it is their desire that thou shouldst take what Providence has given into thy keeping—always provided thou canst adjust such acceptance with thy conscience—and use it for the honour of the Church and the glory of God and the Blessed Virgin."

Friar Anselm crossed himself. A moment or two later, the Guardian hastily did likewise, before saying:

"And if you resolve to depart, it would be your duty to live as other men; and seek in marriage a good Catholic wife, and bring into the world and rear a family of pious Catholic offspring."

Friar Anselm's heart involuntarily leapt at sight of freedom: ashamed of his temporality, he cried:

"I should never leave you, my Father, and the life I have chosen."

"Not in the service of the Church?"

"My Father!"

"The life that would be yours for such a one as thou art, my son, would be no light pilgrimage, but a narrow path bestrewn with the obstacles the wicked would throw in thy way. It would be set with deep pitfalls, many snares, and if you obtained that for which you went thither, I doubt not but that it would not be until after

thy heart had been grievously bruised, and that, a thousand times, thou wouldst wish thyself here again."

"Is that so, my Father?"

"It is so; and dost know why?"

"Tell me, my Father."

"For all the good counsel I would give thee, thou wouldst be attracted by fair women even as the moth is attracted by the candle; and the heart of a beautiful woman is the most loved hiding-place of at least seven devils."

Friar Anselm was moved to remonstrance.

"My mother was a beautiful woman," he said.

"She was a very good Catholic," came the quick response. "No, my son, and I speak as one who knows only too well of the devious ways of men: avoid fair women as thou wouldst the Powers of Darkness, and wouldst save thy soul alive, for, as I said, such are not for such a one as thou art. Verily they are the whitest of sepulchres, and are for the lewd, the base, the froward; and they love these because like ever seeks like; and, as I told thee, the hearts of such women are wholly bad."

A short silence was broken by the Guardian, who continued:

"Should you elect to leave us, my son, for the honour of the Church, I doubt not but that you will endeavour to do many good works. Seek not to do too much, for if you pluck but one brand from the burning, you will do well."

"So little, my Father!"

"So much, my son. And if you decide to go, we will talk much before you depart; but"—here he took a further pinch of snuff—"but the mate thou shouldst seek should be one of the Marthas of this world, rather than a Mary; one who is devoted to her father, if she has one living—who is, of course, pious, and, above all, one who is a good cook, for such a one has a heart of purest gold."

"If—if I go, I will bear in mind thy words, my Father."

"Until thou seest one of the Devil's handmaidens, and then thou wilt be utterly undone, for, as I told thee, at

least seven devils will lurk in her heart. And in such case I would urge on thee cold water, prayer, abstinence—and above all, cold water. Go now, my son, and ponder all I have said to thee.”

“Thy blessing, my Father, before I go.”

The blessing given, Friar Anselm quitted the Guardian's presence; it did not once occur to him that the taking of his freedom had been looked on as a foregone conclusion.

And any doubts Friar Anselm may have had of the wisdom of forsaking the monastery were practically decided upon his next visit to the chapel on the following morning for “Matins and Lauds”; for after he had knelt and prayed, his eyes sought the coldly beautiful face of St. Teresa above the high altar.

The dawn had once more, as it were, called her to life, and as he looked, the newly risen sun suffused her with its glory; not only with this, for to-day it appeared to endow her with a sweet humanity which warmed the blood in her veins and thawed her austerity.

She, also, it seemed, regretted the lot she had chosen; and since Friar Anselm was of the same mind, he looked upon the appealing alteration as a sign that he would do well to follow the hankerings of his heart, and shift for himself among the daughters of men.

CHAPTER II

“ A WHITED SEPULCHRE ”

PAUL QUILLIAN stood on the Admiralty Pier at Dover.

His tall, slightly stooping form was clad in the handiwork of a Belgian tailor; and whilst his fellow-passengers were straggling through the Custom House (a porter was doing what was necessary with his meagre belongings, which were packed in a little canvas trunk), his eyes eagerly drank in the spread of sea and sky.

It was a clear spring day, and the youth of the year got into his blood and made it dance in his veins. He was somewhat ashamed of this mere joy of living, since such was at issue with the ecclesiastical precepts he had imbibed for so long; but in a very little while he was held by the profusion of blue, and this—what he would have called “ weakness ” in his more normal moments—was assisted by the fact of his mind more or less revelling in his newly gained freedom.

He had taken heartfelt farewells of the kind, wise Guardian and the Brothers before setting out, and in walking to the station he had been not a little moved by the medieval suggestions of the vast butter-market, the time-worn streets of Ypres. He regretted the step he had taken, and was not a little fearful of the snares that awaited him in the new world he was entering, and of which he was pitifully ignorant; and it would not have taken much to make him turn back and seek shelter in the protecting walls of the monastery that had been his home for so long.

A sight of the stout old walls which Vauban had erected at the bidding of his august Master, however, had awakened his interest, before serving to reproach him

for being weak where he should have been of good courage; and as the train had crawled across the many miles of South Flanders on its way to Bruges, where he would wait for the boat train to Ostend, his zest for the great adventure which lay directly ahead had increased in proportion with the tale of distance separating him from Ypres and the significance it possessed.

He had had over an hour to wait at Bruges. Leaving his trunk in the cloakroom, he had repaired to the cathedral near by, where he had prayed for grace and succour in case of need.

On boarding the boat that would take him to England, he at first had been shyly interested in what had hitherto been practically an unknown genus of his species; but force of habit had urged him to avoid their presence, so he had engaged a cabin, where he had read and pondered a favourite chapter in his beloved St. Thomas à Kempis.

It was Chapter XLII. which had been the burden of his meditations.

"A Christian must devote himself entirely to God before he can be happy."

"Lose thy life, and thou shalt find it. Forsake thyself, and thou shalt possess Me. Esteem and possess nothing, and thou shalt enjoy all Things. For I will recompence thee with greater Treasures, and infinitely increase thy Store, when thou hast made over into My Hands all that thou hast and art."

His gladness in his newly found liberty had been slightly damped by the thoughts to which the above and following passages had given rise.

He was rich with possessions that in contrast with his previous poverty seemed to put him without the reach of the most sordid avarice, and he had had an instinctive belief that should he be successful in the search on which he had embarked it would bring him an abiding measure of happiness. It had then been brought home to him that he would never win felicity, and since, according to St. Thomas à Kempis, the road he had elected to travel promised to lead to desert places, he consoled himself by thinking that, after all said and done, a secular life

was a bitter pilgrimage, and that, whatsoever might befall, he must endure patiently, gladly, inasmuch as he was adventuring in the service of Mother Church.

Now he stood on the pier; forgetful of the tonsure on his head, which he would fain conceal from the dwellers in a heretic land, he held his hat in his hand.

The wind laved his face and hair with caresses; the sunlight shone in his heart; the racy smell of the sea was pleasing to his nostrils; and for the time being the hesitations that had troubled him were more and more forgotten: he only knew it was good to be alive.

He was careless of the passage of time, and was only recalled to a sense of the immediate present by the voice of the porter, who had seen to his things in the Customs.

"Going by this train, sir?"

Quillian turned, and looked at the man with dazed eyes.

"If you are, sir, she's just off. Couldn't find you before."

"Thank you for reminding me."

He followed the porter until they reached the length of carriages, where the latter said:

"What class, sir?"

"First. Try and find me an empty carriage."

"I'll try, sir. But it's rather late, and there's so many crossing to-day."

While the porter searched for an empty compartment Quillian hastened to the bookstall, where he asked for and could not obtain a *Dublin Review*. In order to get acquainted with the happenings of his new world, he bought a lot of daily papers and illustrated journals. The porter's voice again sounded in his ear.

"Very sorry, sir, all the carriages is full."

"Indeed!"

"Any more going on?" shouted the guard.

Quillian was irked by the business-like promptitude of things as he was finding them; these were in sad contrast with the more than leisurely doings in the monastery.

"Anywhere will do," he said.

"Smoking, sir?"

"Not smoking."

“Here you are, sir. Be quick; she’s just off.”

Quillian handsomely tipped the porter, scrambled into the carriage, and on taking his seat saw that the farther corner was filled by a richly dressed woman.

His first thought was to fly the carriage, but the train was already on the move, and he had to stay where he was. He took up the first journal which came to hand, and held it before unseeing eyes.

Two notions regarding women were at issue in his mind. The more considerable was that which had been cultivated from the earliest days of his association with the Roman Church—this, that even as Eve had tempted and led astray the progenitor of the human race, it was so designed that her sex was to be a snare to the unwary, and one of the Powers of Darkness’s most trusted allies to lead man into sinful ways and to make him forfeit his chances of salvation.

Set against this were dim recollections of his mother and her few female friends; they were all good women, and try as he might, he could not condemn a whole sex off-hand; moreover, a sex that included such as these.

Deep down in Paul Quillian’s heart was also a barely acknowledged conviction that for each man who was worthy to be loved there existed a woman who would be as a steadfast beacon-light in the stormy passage of life; who, beyond being his counsellor and friend in time of need, would not only be his very complement, but the mother of his children; and thoughts of the hitherto unlooked-for human happiness which he was out to seek, and hoped to find, bestowed a magical sweetness on the quest for which he had left the seclusion of the monastery.

He dwelled for a while on the possibilities which, with the blessing of Providence, might become facts. In so doing he happened to lower the sixpenny journal he had held before his face. The next moment he believed that the woman in the farther corner was glancing in his direction. He at once involuntarily raised the *Sketch* in order to shield himself from what his ecclesiastical training stigmatized as contamination.

Once more his fancies dwelt in the pleasant places of this world—pleasant places which owe their enchantment

to a woman's magic influence—until he was pulled up short at recalling his parting from the good Guardian.

Quillian's spiritual Father had been loth to say farewell to one he truly loved; he had been hard put to it to restrain his emotion.

He had taken many pinches of snuff; had again told the adventurer that, if his hopes met with shipwreck, there was always the old peace awaiting him in the cell he had left; and had said: "My son, I love thee, and it is hard to part. But once more let me warn thee against the seven devils that lurk in a fair woman's heart. Love such a one at your peril, for you will be consumed in unquenchable torments."

And after the Guardian had given his last blessing in an unsteady voice, he had blown his nose, and added:

"Succeed in plucking but one brand from the burning, and you will do well. And in the day of temptation, my son, do not forget prayer, abstinence, and cold water. But, above all, cold water."

Quillian's eye was attracted by the stretch of countryside which was visible through the window at his elbow. The sight of pasture, hedgerow, and trees seemed to respond to something in his blood; he reproached himself for his lack of eagerness to see something of the England from which he had been separated so long.

And for a while his senses were intoxicated with the thought of being again in the land of his birth; so much was he moved that he looked with tender eyes on the beasts of the field the train passed in its swift progress.

It occurred to him that he was neglecting to cultivate a very necessary knowledge of the life he was entering, and opened at random one of the publications he had bought. He was shocked at catching sight of the scantily-clad comeliness of a musical comedy actress, and sharply closed the journal. In so doing he was uncomfortably alive to the fact of his proximity to another daughter of Eve.

He was minded to look at the newspapers, but reflected that if it were incumbent on him to pick up as soon as may be information of current happenings, how much

more it was necessary for him to learn something of that unknown quantity, woman !

A little later, and with considerable searchings of conscience, he was furtively looking at the other occupant of the compartment.

Not for long, for almost immediately he saw a pair of attractive dark eyes meeting his.

Once more he withdrew his curiosity and shielded himself behind a newspaper, which this time was the *Daily Mail* : he was ashamed of his forwardness, and the more so since it had been discovered.

The glance he had taken of his travelling companion was enough to tell him that, so far as appearances went, she was one of those whom his late spiritual Father had classified as "whited sepulchres." She was by no means in her first youth; was not, on the face of it, strikingly beautiful; yet there was something appealingly feminine about her which allured Quillian in spite of his intuitive knowledge that the Guardian would have strongly disapproved of his interest in her.

He wished once more that he had not idled precious minutes in woolgathering on the pier at Dover, so that he might have journeyed in another carriage.

He sought to set his mind on the contents of the news-sheet, and his nostrils were conscious of a subtle aroma begotten of purple and fine linen or of some rare scent. It was certainly embarrassing to be brought into contact with such a one on his first entry into his new life, and more particularly was this the case since he was aware she was repeatedly glancing at him.

Then he was almost startled out of his wits by her addressing him (she spoke in a low and modulated voice), and saying :

"Would you very much mind opening one of the windows?"

The blood coloured his ascetic face.

"I—I beg your pardon," he stammered, and she repeated her request.

He pulled himself together, and replied :

"Certainly not. Which?"

"You might feel the draught. This one, near me."

He did as he was bid, and somewhat clumsily.

"Thank you so much; it is good of you," she said.

Their eyes met, and he saw that hers would be very large if she fully opened them, and that lights slumbered in their depths.

The jolting of the train constrained him to seat himself in the middle of the seat. He was edging away to his corner, and she said :

"You can smoke if you want to."

"Thank you, I don't smoke."

"Not?"

"Very rarely."

A short silence was broken by her absently asking:

"Doesn't everyone smoke?"

"I don't know."

"Not?"

"I am sorry to be so ignorant; but I am."

She gave him a swift, appraising glance with wider opened eyes before saying:

"Going far?"

"London."

"I've come from Brussels."

Her voice and manner held a weariness that disarmed the suspicion that she was trying to pump him, and impelled his quick sympathies in her direction.

"I have come from Ypres," he told her.

"Ypres!"

"In South Flanders."

"I know it well."

"You do?"

"That is to say, I was there ever so many years ago, and something happened which I shall never forget."

"Indeed!" he returned, and with an inflection of surprise in his voice.

"I was with friends, but I went out one dark evening alone; the dreariness of the place appealed to me, and——"

"Yes?" as she paused.

"It's all so trivial it's not worth telling."

"I should like to hear," he returned.

"Are you French?" she asked quickly.

"English."

"You look English. But you speak—where was I? Yes, I went out alone in the deserted, dark streets, and presently lost my way."

"You did?"

"And found myself by a very old church in a by-street; it was surrounded by tall trees."

"St. Martin's?"

"You know it?"

"Well."

"The leaves were rustling ever so sadly in the wind, and brought home to me that nothing—nothing whatever mattered the least bit, since the end of everything was a mouldy church and a dirge of stirring leaves. It quite frightened me; I was glad to get away; and although it happened very many years ago I have never quite forgotten it."

"But surely it could not have been so many years ago," returned Quillian artlessly—her face appeared younger while she spoke.

"Why?"

"Well——"

"How old do you think I am?" she asked bluntly.

"I could not tell you."

"Guess."

"I am unable."

"'Unable'!"

"I know so little of women."

"Indeed!"

"I have not spoken to a woman for a great number of years," he gravely told her.

"Not?" she returned, and somewhat aroused from her listlessness.

"No."

"Then——"

"I have just left a monastery."

"At Ypres?"

"Yes. St. Bernardine. Do you know it?"

"I have seen it. Holiday?"

"I have left for good."

The next moment he regretted he had not curbed his

tongue, and put down his garrulity to the influence of one or more of the devils that, in the gospel according to the Guardian, lurked in every attractive woman's heart. Notwithstanding this apprehension, there was no gain-saying the common sympathy of the two who were travelling together; but doubtless, reflected Quillian, this was a means of clouding his understanding.

He was aware of an increase of interest in the woman almost facing him. Her listlessness fell from her as might a cloak, and with this loss of diffidence was an animation that made her the more appealing.

"How interesting!" she remarked.

"Indeed!"

"At least, it is to me. It's all so different from the men I meet."

Her eyes rarely left his face, and he looked on the ground, where he was distressed by her little shoes and the merest glimpse of black silk openwork stockings.

"I thought you unusual when you got into the carriage, and, you see, I wasn't wrong. May I ask where you are going to stay?"

"At a hotel near the station for a few days."

"The Grosvenor?"

"I—I suppose so."

A few moments' silence was broken by her saying:

"What are you going to do with your life?"

With anyone else he might have resented this inquisition; somehow his native humility was flattered by the questioning of such a comely woman.

"Many things." He half smiled.

"Convert the ungodly?"

"Scarcely that."

"I'm glad to hear it."

Quillian opened his eyes, and his heart sank.

"It's uphill work nowadays," she went on.

"If that is so, the greater would be the merit."

"Tell me—but don't answer if you don't want to—will you have to work?"

"Work?"

"To live?"

"I have more than enough," he told her; and directly

he had spoken he was subtly aware that she was in some measure disappointed.

"I'm sorry."

"Sorry!"

"For you."

"May I ask why?"

"I suppose you will think me impertinent and curious, and all that sort of thing, presuming to ask you questions; and there are things I should like to say, but—but——"

"Yes?"

"The circumstances all seem so out of the way, and you seem so different from anyone I have ever met, that advice from a worldly woman who is so much older than you may be of use."

"It is very kind of you," he returned, and, in spite of himself, drew nearer to the other.

"I suppose you want to be happy?"

"If it is justifiable happiness."

"We're nearing town, or I would tell you of the dangers and perils you will meet with from all sorts and conditions of women, who will be after your money."

"You tell me that!" he cried in astonishment.

"Why not?" she calmly rejoined.

"You warn me against your own sex!"

"All women hate each other, and——"

"But——"

"And most of them are so base, it takes one to see through another. Have I surprised you?"

"Much."

"Ah! It only tells me how easily you will be deceived. But it is with regard to winning so-called happiness that I would advise you."

"You say 'so-called'!"

"There is no such thing."

"No?"

"No. What joy in life that there is lies in the pursuit of it; directly we believe it to be won, it ceases to interest us."

"But surely——"

"Let me finish. I suppose you will take up things?"

"I've made no plans."

"Anyone who has anything in them always does. And if I may advise you, go very, very slowly. The keener one's impressions, the sooner one goes through things, and if one goes too fast, the sooner one reaches the great loneliness."

"The great loneliness?" he queried.

"Complete, unutterable boredom with everyone and everything."

There flashed into Quillian's mind the recollection of all the Guardian had said to him regarding the disease of the soul called "Accidie," from which even those who had taken vows were not free, and he said:

"I know what that is."

"You know?"

"It is 'Accidie,' an ailment of the soul which affects the worldly."

"I've never heard of it."

"It was well known to the early Fathers. St. Thomas Aquinas and——"

"Please, please!" she interrupted, and with a charming gesture of protest. "Whatever it is, it is there, and all the talking in the world won't alter it."

"But surely you——"

"I'm speaking impersonally," she interrupted almost sharply.

"Then surely everyone—most men and women have the consolations of religion."

"Of what! Did you say religion?"

"I did. Have they not?"

"Y-yes."

"You hesitate."

"I did."

"Then——"

"That you must find out for yourself," she said almost sadly.

Her words, her angle of vision, depressed him; he was lost in uneasy thought until she said:

"I am sorry."

"You are!"

"But I am doing you a kindness you may one day appreciate."

"And, after all," she said a little later, "you may have better luck than most. You may tumble on your feet all your days; and I devoutly hope you will."

As an after-thought, she added: "I'm afraid you won't."

"Why afraid?"

"You don't seem wonderfully armed for a contest with a beastly world which takes every advantage of innocence and good nature."

"There is always my faith," he said simply.

She all but made a gesture of protest.

"And I can't believe that the ways of life are as barren as you would lead me to think."

"I wish they were not, for your sake."

"Surely there is happiness to be found in simple things!"

"What is in your mind?"

"Love of nature, love of one's kind, love of friends, and—and——"

"Go on," she said, with a bitter smile.

"Love of some——"

"Stop!"

"But——"

"There is no such thing," she said, and with a surprising decision in one who of a surety was desirable in the eyes of men.

"No such thing?"

"As the love of man for woman and of woman for man which you may have in your mind. It may exist occasionally—very, very occasionally—in one of them. There is no such thing."

He looked at her with big, troubled eyes, and she said, after a moment or two:

"We are almost in London, and I've already said enough to depress you. And perhaps I've also depressed myself, which serves me right."

She half sighed, and turned to stare with unseeing eyes at the wilderness of roofs and chimney-pots. Quillian did the same.

He had looked forward to the approach of London with the curiosity of one who is burning to learn all he can

of a new environment; now he had only thought for the warning that had fallen from his companion's red lips. Coupled with this was a desire to soothe the distresses from which it was evident she suffered with spiritual consolation, but somehow he was regretfully sensible that such would fall on deaf ears: her's was an undoubted case of "Accidie" with which only the wise Guardian could deal.

The stopping of the train for the collection of tickets interrupted his cogitations; and after the guard had opened and shut the carriage door, she said, and with a return to her former listlessness:

"Here is my card, if ever you care about seeing me again."

Quillian took it; the other went on:

"I go out a lot, and hate it; but I shall always be in to you if you write or telephone. Here we are, and I'd drive you if you were going any distance."

"Thank you," was all he said.

Upon the train stopping, she rose to her feet, and he was surprised she was not so tall as he had believed her to be. He would have opened the carriage door, but was anticipated by a man in livery, who touched his hat to his mistress.

"Good-bye," she said, "and thank you."

"What for?"

"Interesting a weary woman. Good-bye."

"Good-bye," he returned.

"And look me up some day."

He watched the footman escort her to a finely appointed motor-car. A minute or two later, he was following the porter, who carried the trunk that shamelessly advertized its foreign manufacture, to the hotel.

CHAPTER III

LONDON

“ANY more luggage, sir ?”

“No.”

Quillian was conscious of a loss of esteem on the part of the hotel attendants on account of his meagre belongings, and ascended by the lift to the fourth floor bedroom which had been allotted to him, where the formal appointments seemed in the nature of indulgence if compared to the bare necessities of the monastery cell he had left.

Directly he was alone, he unpacked his trunk (this did not take very long), refreshed himself with a wash, and then sat on the bed in order to take stock of his impressions, which, over and beyond the confusion set up in his mind by the hurry and scurry of the railway terminus, were mostly taken up with the woman he had spoken with in the train.

He had had no business, he told himself, to strike up a chance acquaintance, and with a member of a sex with regard to whom he had ever to be on his guard. He had been weak where he should have been strong, and had succumbed at the first assault of the tempter.

And, worst of all, he had liked her, and could not deny they had been drawn together by a common sympathy—this in spite of her being a worldly woman, and one whom the Guardian, out of his wide knowledge, would probably have given short shrift.

The first effect of his self-examination was to fill him with apprehension concerning other women he should meet, and this set him wondering if they, too, and more particularly those whose eyes were blinded to the higher things of life, would prove equally alluring.

He could not forget that she had as good as hinted she would like to see him again, and he resolved to put her out of his mind as soon as may be; but before he went downstairs he pulled out the card on which was written:

MRS. RAYMOND CHATILLON

23A, HILL STREET, W.

HILTON COURT, HILTON, SOMERSET.

"Married and, of course, a woman of means," he reflected. "Doubtless one of those who lead butterfly lives."

He was minded to tear it up. Upon its occurring to him that commonplace distractions would not appeal to her at all, and that she was a sufferer from a bad attack of "Accidie," he put it carefully away. He did not know quite what was in his mind, since he had no intention of taking advantage of her invitation. Perhaps he had a barely formulated idea that some day he might be able to provide the succour of which she was in need.

Quillian went downstairs to the big hotel drawing-room, where he sat in a corner, and after he had secured the attention of a waiter, he ordered tea. He was embarrassed by the men and women of all ages who were slowly filling the room, and sheltered himself behind some journals that he gathered from a table near by.

Again he was held by the obvious contrast between the tranquil silence of the ordered life in the monastery and the din—as it appeared to him—that was going on all about him; it seemed to him that pandemonium was let loose, and wondered how people could have so much to say to each other.

He was fearful how one of his antecedents could bear a part amongst those who apparently expressed a thought almost before it was formulated; he marvelled if they jabbered in the same way during all the business of their lives; and told himself that, if a flowing tongue were one of the weapons necessary to hold one's own, he was indeed ill equipped.

Then he was both attracted and repelled by certain picture-hats; the tasteful frocks they set off; although he could not approve of such costly fripperies, he did not deny they were pleasing to the eye.

He was aware he had caught the attention of two or three groups of extravagant millinery, and saw that its wearers were speaking of him; he did not doubt that his queer appearance—perhaps they had caught sight of his tonsure—was the cause of it—and shielded himself by the biggest of the journals.

The ceaseless chatter, the feeling that he was being picked out as an oddity, decided him to beat a retreat. He got up and made for the nearest door, keeping as near to the wall as was possible, and more than ever conscious of those who were giving him heed.

He found refuge in his bedroom, where he sat on his bed, and considered his plans for the immediate future.

The Guardian had repeatedly counselled him with regard to the unwisdom of betraying his means to all and sundry until he had some acquaintance with the devious ways of the worldly; had told him that, beyond paying the shortest of visits to the great house which was his, it would be well to live modestly for a considerable time in London, which was a place that would all too soon supply the education of which he was in need; and had given him two letters to spiritual directors—one in London, the other near his future home—who, beyond providing the privileges of his faith, would be a very certain help in time of trouble. He would be unable to see the former for a week or two since this priest, a Father Horan, was away on a much-needed holiday.

There would be visits to solicitors, in addition to those of his father, and from these last he would seek advice about taking a flat or small house.

And then—and this loomed large in his horizon—he must pursue the Great Adventure, the necessity of which was the reason of his quitting St. Bernardine.

Just now his senses were vexed by the hustle he had endured, and he told himself he would be in no hurry to adventure his soul among the fair ones of the earth were it not his bounden duty.

He was seized by a passion of restlessness, and was athirst for knowledge, however scanty, of the ways of men in the vast city; he bridled this desire as an exercise of self-control, and because he had already given rein to his

inclinations more than enough for one day, he spent the hours that separated him from dinner in prayer and meditation.

Upon the hour of dinner approaching, he was minded to have it served in a private room in order to escape the curiosity to which he had been subject in the drawing-room a few hours back. He got the better of what he called cowardice, and in due course went downstairs, though not without a suspicion of trepidation; he was aware he would encounter women in evening dress.

As luck would have it, the assurance with which he sought to veneer his natural humility was blown to the four winds on catching sight of his reflection in a mirror immediately without the entrance to the dining-room, into which men and women were streaming. He had not given a thought to his Belgian garments, but the sight of their queer outlines—they were baggy in the wrong places, and unduly tight in others—against that fashionable throng made him wish for the monastic robe he had worn with simple dignity.

He feared difficulty in obtaining the attentions of the waiters, and did not know that on account of the nearness of the station they were used to handling all sorts of queer cattle shot out by the arriving continental trains.

He gave his hat into the care of a bechained official who was enthroned in a recess, and secured a seat at a table where a pillar did much to screen him from observation. If the dignified wine steward were disposed to hold him in light esteem, his respect was won on Quillian's ordering a respectable vintage claret. Wine was one of the few things of this world they understood at the monastery.

The elaborate table furniture was contrasted in his mind's eye with the wooden platters, the bare tables, of his former home, which had merely provided for primitive wants. The many knives, forks, and spoons arrayed before him seemed not a little symbolical of the new life he had entered—a new life which, of set purpose, appeared a meticulous elaboration of simple needs.

While he ate he thought of the friars at Ypres; he pictured them as having just finished their simple supper,

and as about to spend an hour or two in private devotions—this was not one of the three evenings a week appointed for self-discipline—before retiring for the night; and for a time his heart ached for the peace he had left.

His mind insensibly wandered to the events of the day—his leave-taking of the Guardian; his rejoicing in his newly found sense of freedom, once he was quit of the influences of Ypres; his meditations during the crossing; his revelling in the glad spring day on the pier at Dover; lastly, his unexpected adventure in the train.

The woman's eyes haunted him, eyes which were eloquent of the "Accidie" of which the Guardian had made mention. Quillian wondered at the cause.

And apart from the attraction she had held for him, he could not fail to admit she was a woman who had a fund of deep human sympathy, and who was dowered with understanding parts.

His narrow theological training did not enable him to solve the problem that faced him—this, how a woman could be both attractive and dead to things of the Spirit from the ecclesiastical standpoint. He feared the interest she held for him was on account of his own burden of original sin.

This misgiving made him neglect his lamb cutlet until he was recalled to its existence by the waiter offering to take it away.

He thought the dinner would never come to an end. Upon its tardy conclusion, instead of seeking his room as he had intended, he asked for his hat, descended to the vestibule of the hotel, and went out into the night.

He hesitated in which direction to go; seeing that the human stream was flowing to the right, he became merged in its current, and let it take him where it listed.

But only for a while.

After passing the tube station, and crossing the Vauxhall Bridge Road, he was dazed by the roar of the traffic, the uncounted human units on the pavements; and bore away to the right, where it promised comparative quiet.

Soon he found himself before the raw immensity of the great cathedral which had been raised to the honour and glory of the Faith. He was on the point of going in, but

held back on reflecting that his first entrance into the fane that stood for so much should not be a haphazard matter, but one that demanded meet preparation.

He wandered into Victoria Street, where, although the road was crowded with public and private vehicles, the pavement was comparatively deserted.

The taxicabs and motor-broughams were nearly all racing in one direction. Now and again he caught glimpses of their sumptuously clad occupants, and it seemed that they were speeding against time to snatch greedily at pleasure—pleasure which, according to Mrs. Chatillon, ever eluded the grasp.

Doubtless she was somewhere to be found amongst those who were hunting for what they could never find, and with a mocking smile on her lips at the vanity of her quest.

The men and women other than the pleasure-seekers next attracted him—men and women who were wearing everyday garb, and were hastening in twos and threes. These, for all he knew to the contrary, might also be bound for the delights of the senses, but that the faces of most of them had a preoccupied careworn look, eloquent of privation and toil.

Apart from their appearance, he was moved by the fact of any and everyone being enormously intent on their individual affairs; there seemed no room in their respective lives for meditation on the things of the Spirit; not even for concern in the welfare of their neighbour.

With a humility that was far removed from curiosity, he wondered what heavy burdens they were condemned to shoulder, what griefs consumed their hearts, and how far these were lessened by faith.

He would have given much for any and all to bare their wounds to his gaze so that he might give them human sympathy, spiritual healing; but one and all seemed to be wearing a veil that hid suffering from his fellows, and discouraged, if not forbade, inquiry.

Quillian's eye wandered to the great buildings which continuously faced each other along the seemingly endless street. He had already passed miles of bricks and mortar in the train that had brought him to London, and the

thought of this vast accumulation of habitations made his brain reel.

For a time he was overwhelmed by the immensity of the human hive which was revealed to his ken; it seemed impossible to minister to the needs of such an agglomeration of souls.

Next, his attention was held by the tier upon tier of dwellings which almost seemed to touch the skies. The windows were illumined with many lights; otherwise they were an impenetrable mask to the eyes of the world.

He did not doubt that many of these dainty curtains hid uncounted mental and physical agonies; and if this were so in this well-to-do part of the town, how much more was this the case in squalid districts where want and hunger, disease and cruelty, stalked abroad!

Even as he thought of these things, Quillian's heart welled with pity for those who were in travail on that spring night; he ached to give plentifully of his substance to all who were in need, to speak of the necessity of bearing sorrow stoutly to those who were afflicted; and out of the fullness of his loving-kindness he gave bountifully to those who asked for alms.

Then, after resolving to get the better of the ignorance that alone prevented him diverting much of his riches into worthy channels, he fell to looking shyly at many of the women he encountered in his progress. They were of all ages, stations in life, and degrees of comeliness. He was overjoyed at discovering that not one of the many faces he saw held any interest for him—overjoyed because, following upon his experience in the train, he had feared that many of those he met would attract him in spite of himself.

After he had passed the venerable pile of the Abbey, the nature of his quest was borne in upon his mind.

He wondered if among the teeming millions of this city there dwelt the one whom it was ordained he would one day make his own in the sight of God.

He marvelled what she might be doing at that self-same moment. Upon his seeking to picture the countenance that would attract him, there came into his mind a sem-

blance of the saint whose stained-glass presentment illumined the high altar of the monastery chapel.

He devoutly hoped he would be worthy of the love of a woman; before he turned back he stopped and murmured a blessing for whomsoever she should prove to be.

In returning to the hotel, Quillian was again stirred by the ceaseless pageantry of the streets, the interminable flow of vehicles, the countless evidences of human activity at that, to him, late hour of the evening. Each and all of these seemed to insist upon his trumpery littleness, and, if anything, he quickened his steps in order to take refuge in his room from a conviction of insignificance.

Arrived at the hotel, he hastened upstairs. After praying long for succour and direction in the momentous step he had taken, he got into what seemed the unduly luxurious bed.

Contrary to expectation, he did not fall asleep; he lay awake, and, so far as he could see, for no reason at all.

His mind was filled with a curious sense of expectation, until he found his attention straining, much as if something untoward were about to happen.

He had not drawn the blinds, and his eyes were arrested by a bit of the glare of the great city which was visible through the window; the roar of the traffic was carried to his ears, and he respectively watched and listened to these evidences of crowded life.

Then, to his alert perceptions, the glare and the roar increased tenfold, until one moment it seemed to his tense apprehensions as if he were near a burning fiery furnace; at another, that he was being stalked by a monster which was seeking whom it might devour.

He was filled with an unreasoning fear, and in a very little while his state of mind was akin to that in which he sometimes lay in bed as a little child, and possessed by a nervous dread of the Powers of Darkness.

And now, as in those far away days, he shut his eyes and sought to comfort himself by repeating almost forgotten doggerels which, somehow, came trippingly to his tongue.

The first was taught him by a sailor uncle, who had retired from the Navy, and who was happy with his

astronomical telescope, which was fitted with a speculum. The rhyme was as follows:

“The Ram, the Bull, the Heavenly Twins ;
And next the Crab the Lion shines,
The Virgin and the Scales.
The Scorpion, Archer, and He-Goat ;
The Man who carries the Watering Pot ;
The Fish with glittering tails.”

The first verse and refrain of “Primrose Farm,” the song his mother sang to his father, came into his mind. He said it to himself as before:

“She sat at quiet Primrose Farm
In the old oak parlour dim,
While out of the window one little arm
Leant down the flow’rs to trim.
He opened the wicket ; he loved her so :
He asked her his bride to be.
‘There’s someone else,’ she answered low,
And her tears fell silently.

“For some must love, and some must wait ;
And some must find their love too late.”

This was followed by a country rhyme, taught him by an old nurse:

“If the geese don’t lay
By Candlemas day,
Cut off their heads
And throw them away.”

Then, other seafaring doggerels he had learned from his sailor uncle:

“If to starboard red appear,
It’s your duty to keep clear ;
To act as judgment says is proper :
‘Port’ or ‘Starboard,’ ‘Astern’ or ‘Stop her.’

“If upon your Port is seen
A steamer’s starboard light of green ;
There is not much for you to do :
Green to red keeps clear of you.

“Green to green, red to red,
Perfect safety, go ahead.”

Lastly, a simple prayer he had learned by heart at his mother's knee :

“ Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John,
Bless the bed I lie upon ;
Four angels to guard my bed,
Two at the foot and two at the head ;
Two to watch me while I pray,
And two to carry my soul away.”

Five minutes later, Paul Quillian was asleep.

CHAPTER IV

FREEDOM

"ARE you waiting to see me?"

"Yes, sir."

"You spoke to me the other day, didn't you?"

"When you were coming out of St. Agatha's, sir."

"If you will come inside, we'll go into the matter."

Quillian opened the door of his flat in James's Mansions, Buckingham Gate, and was meekly followed by the lean, shabby, elderly man who had been waiting for him, and who had an indefinable atmosphere of ecclesiasticism.

The two men entered a severely furnished room, where the younger, noticing that the other looked weary, told him to be seated.

"No, thank you, sir; not to-day. To-day's a fast."

"Still——"

"No, sir; not even the tortures of St. Severin would make me sit on a 'fast.'"

"Let me see, what is your name?"

"Grumby, sir. Michael Gregory Grumby."

"I seemed to know your face when you first spoke to me the other day."

"I'm not a bit surprised," returned Grumby, with the ghost of a self-conscious smile.

"Indeed!"

"Ladies has seen in me a distinct likeness to St. Thomas Aquinas."

"And you want employment in some capacity?"

"Only with you, sir. D'rectly I set eyes on you, I said to myself, 'I'd sooner work with that gentleman for nothing than wax fat with the 'eathen.'"

"Didn't I understand you to say you acted sacristan

at St. Agatha's for five weeks?" asked Quillian, who was not disposed in the man's favour by his flattery.

"Yes, sir, when the permanent sacristan was down with measles, caught from the children he keeps an eye on."

"What were you doing before that?"

"Odd jobs, sir; jobs various."

Quillian looked at the man's eyes, which had a trick of glancing furtively in any and every direction other than his questioner; and even with his slender knowledge of human nature, he suspected Grumby was shifty.

"Of course you can give references?"

"Y-yes, sir. Ahem! I was often requisitioned to carry a banner on procession days. Responsible work carrying a banner; gives a individual touch, as one might say—to say nothing of the risk."

"Risk?"

"A turn of the wrist, sir, and one's maimed for life."

"Is that so?" said Quillian coldly.

"More or less, sir."

Quillian reflected for a few moments before saying:

"The proprietors of these flats see to everything in the way of attendance, and I get my meals in the restaurant downstairs, so——"

"I never seem to get any luck on 'fasts,' sir," interrupted Grumby, while his face wore an expression of gladly endured martyrdom.

"You don't let me finish. I am going into the country for a week or so the day after to-morrow, and on my return I expect to be more or less busy, and shall want someone responsible to be here in my absence."

Grumby's face lit up as if descrying succouring angels in the offing.

"And if you can give me one satisfactory reference——"

It seemed as if the angels had changed their mind, for an expression of pitiful suffering came into the man's face.

"It surely cannot be difficult!" urged Quillian.

"I assure you, sir, I come of a family that is one and all of us in the ascetic line. And if you would write to my Uncle Jonas——"

"Where is he?"

"He's hermit in the Bristol tea-gardens. And Uncle Tobias is a fasting man at Liverpool."

"Perhaps I'd better speak to Father Nicholas at St. Agatha's."

"Then I am lost in the bottomless pit," moaned Grumby.

His meagre body seemed to become more emaciated, his throat to shrivel, and his knees to tremble; his shifty eyes became a-swim.

"Come, come!" said Quillian sympathetically. "If he has anything against you, perhaps it's just possible there is another side to the story."

"There is, sir," declared Grumby emphatically.

"Well?"

"His reverence said it was strong drink, sir—you see how honest I am about it."

"And was it?"

"Pork!" said the old man stoutly.

"Pork?"

"If ever I takes pork or veal, I'm done for. I gets the indigestion awful, and I'm helpless for days."

"You should have seen a doctor, and——"

"If one errs in the way of pork or veal, I believe in penance, sir."

Quillian was almost certain the man was a humbug. Not wishing to be unduly hard on him, and believing that another chance would assist him to resist temptation, he said:

"I will take you for a month on trial. And if I see Father Nicholas, I'll mention I'm doing this, and shall not ask any questions. You can come in to-morrow."

He had feared an outburst of gratitude. Grumby at once recovered himself, and said:

"Thank you, sir. Indigestion is a pitiful thing, and for all I hear tell, there's no mention of it in the early Fathers."

Quillian's kindness with regard to Grumby had not been altogether inspired by charity. He did not hide from himself that there was a leaven of selfishness in his consideration, begotten of his immense curiosity concern-

ing the endless tale of life which was ever unfolding itself before his wondering eyes. Grumby might further this enlightenment, and with regard to phases of existence of which he was ignorant.

He had now been in London the best part of four weeks, and each day had brought some fascinating surprise.

His life had been cast in such a narrow groove that it was enough for him merely to walk out of doors in any given direction to find distraction in the everyday incidents of the streets; these, beyond diverting him, assisted the knowledge of human nature in which he was so pitifully lacking.

His appetite grew with what it fed on until he took a zest in life of which he was often ashamed. Try as he might, however, he could not bring himself to deny that it was good to be alive; that he more than rejoiced in his freedom from the trammels of monastic discipline.

And in return for the feast that his species so bountifully spread, he gave them of the love of his heart and, when opportunity served, profusely, if often foolishly, of his plenty.

It seemed so good of everyone to devote such a cheerful, single-hearted attention to their affairs—to face bravely anything Providence might think seemly to inflict—that he ached to bestow of his substance for the good of humanity at large, and resolved to make a beginning on his return from his short stay at the home he had inherited.

Nor did his love extend only to his kind.

In seeing the sights of London he had included the Zoological Gardens, where he had been so delighted by the infinite variety of beasts and birds that he had been a frequent visitor and had got rid of many odd shillings in buying food for his favourites.

The elephants particularly attracted him. He spent hours in their company, and quite decided that if he had to work for his living he would like nothing better than to be one of their attendants.

He wondered if it would be too great a self-indulgence to have an elephant of his own later on.

And he made friends with the dogs in the neighbour-

hood, and had made up his mind to have his house full of them after he had finally settled down.

In going out and about, it fired his blood on the infrequent occasions he saw animals ill-treated. He always remonstrated, and burned to inflict bodily chastisement; but he realized that his slack muscles would be helpless against a doughty adversary, and had written for the prospectus of a Swedish gymnasium.

Quillian fully realized that all these delights were a mere preliminary to the serious issues of life in which he was resolved to bear no mean part. By way of making some sort of beginning, and to assure himself he was not giving all his time to idling, he devoted his evenings to hard reading.

And the wonderfully romantic vistas of the past which were revealed to his ken in the pages he devoured !

It was the story of human progress which chiefly attracted him; not the story "doctored" by Authority, to which he had hitherto been confined, but the dispassionate history of the ebb and flow of the consciousness of right in the effort to make headway against tyranny and privilege.

The mighty world-dramas depicted with such vivid colouring in Gibbon's "Decline and Fall" were his chief delight—this in spite of being not a little shocked by its anti-ecclesiastical bias. It grieved him to read that the patron saint of England was said to be a butcher of Cappadocia, who was torn to pieces by the mob for selling diseased meat to the army; and he could not help having a sneaking admiration for the heroism and genius of Julian the Apostate.

He did not dare to think what his new director, who had not yet returned from his much-needed change, would say of these excursions into more or less forbidden ways; he justified his unorthodoxy by assuring himself that he was only doing his utmost to equip himself for the struggle that lay ahead, and could not deny that, after all said and done, he was studying the procession of life from delightfully confusing angles.

For the time being, he had resolved to let the subject of women alone, yet he could not get away from the fact

of the all-powerful influence they had exerted on the course of events from the recorded beginnings of things; and if they had inspired noble deeds, it was equally true that unnumbered crimes stood to the account of their sex.

And if he were troubled by the frequency with which they had caused blood to flow, the callousness with which they had looked on suffering of their making, he told himself how that was all in the barbaric past—that Christianity had worked the surpassing miracle of purging their minds of dross.

Even if he had doubted this alteration for the better, he had only to go out into the streets and look at the multitudes of hard-working citizens, who toiled long hours either for dear ones at home, or for those they hoped to win for their own: and surely they would not waste their lives in striving for those who were unworthy!

Since he was removed from the necessity of earning his living, he must wholeheartedly make use of his advantages for the wellbeing of others less happily placed: only thus could he justify his hardihood in winning a mate for himself; and until he had qualified himself for a place in the ranks of those who cheerfully shouldered heavy burdens, he was not worthy to be thus blessed.

Notwithstanding his resolve to defer getting a knowledge of women (so far as this was possible), he was nearly always sensible of the haunting witchery of sex; and this was not a little stimulated by certain winsome girls he chanced upon in the streets on taking his walks abroad: for all the caution of the Guardian with regard to the many devils which had a hiding-place in the hearts of such as these, their graceful movements, happy laughter, and the soft glances they sometimes threw in his direction, lingered long in his memory; an individual face would persistently fill his thoughts, and it was only by hard reading and mental effort that he would succeed in putting it out of his mind.

Quillian had written to the housekeeper of "Courts," the property in Kent, saying he was making the shortest of stays, and that, beyond the religious director who would watch over the needs of his soul when living there, he did not wish his visit to be known to anyone:

he had resolved on his return to put his hand to the plough.

This afternoon he seemed unable to settle to anything within doors, so determined to go out; on leaving his flat, he had nothing definite in mind; he yielded to the impulse of the moment, and set foot on the first stationary motor-bus he came upon.

It was going Eastwards. After it had threaded the Strand and Fleet Street, thoroughfares he already knew well, it came to a part of London that had all the charm of novelty.

The teeming ways of the City told him, if further assurance were necessary, of the strenuous lives lived by those who toil and spin; he was so interested in the countless evidences of activity he witnessed on every hand that he left the bus, and mingled with the black-coated, top-hatted throng.

This was the most striking contrast he had yet come upon to the contemplative existence at Ypres; and after being somewhat dazed by the bustle, he found himself thinking how much more befitting a man was this life of crowded adventure than the lot that had been his; and this reflection reminded him how quickly he had got rid of many of his ecclesiastical prejudices, and now looked at things from much of the standpoint of a man of the world.

And if, as was not infrequently the case, he suffered from the prickings of conscience at having agreed to the renunciation of his vows, he strove to comfort himself by bearing in mind how young and ignorant he had been at the time he had welcomed the suggestion that he should embrace the monastic life.

Now and again he was attracted by infrequent evidences of the older London which had been effaced by a utilitarian passion for improvement; on following a narrow street flanked by what had once been the stately homes of City merchants, he came upon one of the long-disused City burial-grounds.

Its forlorn appearance, the callous way it was hemmed in by tall warehouses, the locked iron gate, all spoke of the ruthless disregard of the dead where the pecuniary

advantage of the living was concerned: he was minded to enter the adjacent church to see if it suffered from a like neglect.

He had scruples about entering a house of worship alien to his faith, but told himself that, since his visit would be in the nature of sight-seeing, he would be justified in so doing: then he reflected how it had been a perennial joke amongst the friars "that the Protestant God was only accessible on Sundays," and in order to see if the church were locked he tried the door.

It yielded to his hand (the place was being swept), and after descending a few steps he found himself in an edifice of which the dignity was, if anything, assisted by what in his eyes was its barrenness of ecclesiastical trappings.

He stared about him with unalloyed curiosity, which was increased upon the charwoman, who was dusting the pews, informing him that it was one of the few City churches which had escaped the "Great Fire."

Quillian fell to reading the mural inscriptions which recorded the virtues of long-since departed citizens: one in particular held his attention, and was raised to the memory of "Mistress Mary Bewley, the late matchless wife, and mother of that hopeful young gentleman, Thomas Bewley," whom she had followed untimely to the grave.

The inscription further stated that "He remembered his Creator in the days of his youth," and that "These (two now with Christ) Lived, Dyed, and Lye in the same grave near to this stone," and that "to both their memories is this monument erected by their sorrowing husband and father."

Although the bereaved mother's tears had been shed nearly three hundred years ago, the simple pathos of the words quickened Quillian's sympathy and imagination; it seemed to him as if her griefs were yet fresh; a moment or two later it was as though the hand of time were put back, until he saw her kneeling in the empty church, and striving to comfort her anguish by telling herself that, in a very little while, she would rejoin the dear one she had lost.

Then, in spite of the irregularity of worshipping in a heretic house of worship, Quillian fell on his knees and

prayed for the repose of the souls of the twain who had slept so long "in the same grave near to this stone."

He was again regarding the monument before leaving the church, when the voice of the charwoman said in his ear:

"Like to see round?"

"That's a very pathetic inscription," remarked Quillian.

"Very pathetic," she returned mechanically. "The vestry's well worth seeing."

But Quillian was not in the mood for sight-seeing just then; on going out into the sunlight, he wondered where next he should betake himself, until he bore in mind that he had hitherto confined his excursions to the more central regions of London, and that he owed it to himself to learn something of the outlying districts.

Acting on the impulse of the moment, he hastened to one of the big arteries of traffic, and mounted to the top of a motor-bus that was going in a north-easterly direction; he had difficulty in finding a seat, since the afternoon was wearing, and the more fortunate of the City workers were already bound for home; many of them carried bulging rush baskets.

The vehicle being crowded to its holding capacity, there were few stoppages; it was not long before the aspect of the ceaseless bricks and mortar, and of the people in the street, changed.

Opulence and an atmosphere of wellbeing gave place to buildings of unmitigated ugliness and vast goods yards; coincident with the commencement of tram-lines, the interminable shops became meaner.

He passed beneath railway bridges, across which trains were lumbering, and although a conspicuous widening of the road suggested relief at escaping from the jealous confinement of the City proper, there was no denying the surrounding squalor, which seemed laying perpetual siege to the riches he had left behind.

So far as the swift progress of the bus enabled him to see, wretched little streets were at right angles to the main thoroughfare, and seemed to lead to less attractive places or down-at-heel squares: it was as though the dis-

trict were well aware of its meanness, and put the best-looking houses in the forefront.

The bus passed a row of gracious Georgian houses, which stood with aloof dignity from the road; and Quillian believed that an abrupt period had been put to the wearisome ugliness: all too soon, however, he found that the soothing red brick was a mere oasis in the wilderness of unsightliness, and that this last threatened to go on for ever.

The shops would infrequently surrender to a row of private dwellings, but even these looked as if dejectedly awaiting the commercial fate which must soon overtake them.

Then the bus dipped, ascended, and crossed a noisome canal which made the merest break between the continuity of dreary masonry; for a time Quillian was constrained to close his eyes in order to shut out the pitiful sameness.

On again looking about him, he sought to get a definite impression of what he was witnessing; presently it seemed as if the varying heights of the buildings stood for the respective interests of those who dwelled therein.

The almost uniform houses and shops were all too often dominated by a gin-palace; and if a church or other place of worship stood well above the public-house, and in so doing suggested escape from ignoble temptation, there was always the never far distant factory chimney, which towered above everything else, and seemed the ultimate factor in life.

And if the men and women who were compelled to spend their days in this debasing environment were, as he had heard at Ypres, rebelling against the hardness of their lot, and clamouring for a share in the finer things of life, could he do otherwise than sympathize with the aspiration of those for whom the factory chimney stood for tyranny as overmastering as that of the medieval castle of old!

Persistent squalor, infrequently lessened by a tree in new leaf, the lust for modern improvement had passed by; and beyond a suggestion of straggling in the side turnings, the cheerlessness of the little shops seemed interminable.

But later, a high brick wall with trees on the farther side suggested that, at last, a breach had been made in all that triumphant ugliness: Quillian's vantage-point, however, enabled him to see that one or two fine old houses had been turned to base uses: one was a brewery; another a laundry; a third stood drearily mourning its emptiness.

Then the street opened out, and there were certain evidences of an old-world village: there were red-bricked, red-tiled cottages, some venerable houses, and what had been a wayside hostelry.

Nearer inspection told him that even this reminder of former dignified repose was in process of dissolution; it seemed as if the prevailing squalor was intent on swallowing up anything that reproached its unseemliness: the inn had just come into the hands of the house-breakers, and a pick had been stuck into a sundial painted on its front wall; the cottages had been condemned by the sanitary authorities, and stood empty; and as for the row of fine houses, most of the windows had been smashed by stones: it was as though they had been grossly insulted before they were demolished.

The bus stopped; the remaining passengers got off; the conductor told Quillian it was going no farther, and he followed their example.

His spirits were affected by all he had seen; he looked about him for a likely place where he could get a cup of tea; this was by no means as easy as it appeared on the face of it, since there was an entire absence of tea-shops: he entered several confectioners without being able to get what he wanted, and was thinking of returning when, on deciding to try one more, he was gratified on being told that his needs could be supplied if he did not mind waiting, and did not object to having it in the shop.

Quillian sat at a table that was littered with loaves; while it was cleared by the woman who had been serving behind the counter, and for the ten minutes he possessed his soul in patience while the tea was being made, his nerves were tortured by the laboured practising of five-finger exercises on a piano upstairs which badly wanted tuning.

The woman was joined by her husband and a tall,

anæmic, spectacled daughter. Quillian sought to divert his mind from the piano upstairs by taking an interest in these and the customers who were coming and going.

Most of these last had more or less to say to those behind the counter, and for the first time the cockney accent in all its native hideousness fell uncouthly on Quillian's ear; he thought at first it was the personal idiosyncrasy of those he overheard speak; upon each and all making use of the same nasal twang, he could only conclude that the sordid growth of London had corrupted their speech.

His attention wandered to the three behind the counter: they all looked overworked, underfed; most significant of all, they did not appear to have sufficient spirit to reply to their customers' remarks: they supplied what was asked for, took the money, gave the necessary change, and, if compelled to reply, expressed themselves in weary monosyllables: there was a touching absence of the joyousness which would have possessed the Belgians of French extraction in a like situation of life.

Quillian drank his tea, paid the trifling sum charged, and set out to explore the neighbourhood.

Directly he left the road by which he had come, there was a startling change in the atmosphere of the place. Instead of the animation provided by the traffic, the shops, and costermongers' barrows, there were either dull, lifeless roads of little modern villas, or streets of older, taller, and very shabby houses, where children played up and down basement steps. He was curious to learn what manner of folk lived in the villas, and did not have to wait long before finding that they were tenanted by weary-looking, black-coated men, who were dribbling home from the City in ones and twos. He noticed how the pale faces lighted up on being greeted by children, who sometimes ran out of doors to welcome their respective fathers.

On returning to the main road, he came upon a Palace of Varieties. A little farther along on the same side of the way was a brilliantly lit Picture Palace. Men and women were streaming into the music-hall, while outside the latter there waited a long tail of children who,

with the price of admission clutched in their hands, eagerly awaited the moment of admission.

Quillian stood and watched the expectancy on the wan faces. It seemed to him that here, in this down-at-heel outer suburb, even as in the opulent West End of London, there was the same passionate pursuit of pleasure.

And he fell to wondering if it were with these as it was with the others—that is to say, if what Mrs. Chatillon had said on the matter were true, and if these children were also in pursuit of what they would never find.

If there were any likelihood of this being the case, Quillian from the bottom of his heart prayed that God, out of the fulness of His mercy, would relent with such as these.

Quillian walked along the pavement that was momentarily becoming more crowded, and noticed the eagerness with which the pinched-looking, silent men and women shoppers appraised the goods on the barrows which here lined the roads. So far as he could tell, their lives were a ceaseless struggle to make two ends meet, and he looked in vain for the suggestion of spirituality in their faces which would be an outward and visible sign of the consciousness of the Life to come.

Perhaps they could not be blamed if their hearts were cold to Divine truths, he told himself; and for all their blindness, there was a Power which watched over them unceasingly, and shaped their sorry existence to Its own purposes.

This reflection brought a measure of consolation to Quillian's troubled soul. He was about to look for a bus that would take him back, when he heard an agonized cry which seemed to come from beneath a passing motor-bus, a shout from many voices, and he was aware of a sickening suspense.

The vehicle pulled up sharply, whereupon there was a crowded movement into the road.

Quillian also pushed forward, and his heart was wrung with anguish at seeing the pitiful, upturned face of the man who had been run over.

CHAPTER V

A STRAY LAMB

QUILLIAN journeyed home with heavy heart.

On finding the man was dead, he had waited beside the body; and, unmindful of the morbidly curious crowd, he had bowed his head and moved his lips in prayer until the arrival of the police ambulance. Then, hearing a voice telling all who cared to listen particulars of the deceased, Quillian had learned a sad story.

It seemed that he was the elder son of a hard-working mother and a thriftless, drunken father; that he had been out of work for some weeks, and only that day had got a job, to which he had gone with a light heart, since he was thus enabled to lighten his mother's load of care.

"Shame it weren't old Bill, instead of the young 'un. No one would have missed 'un. But it's always like that," the informant had remarked.

Quillian had obtained the victim's address, and had resolved to assist handsomely the bereaved mother.

On reaching Westminster, he made a poor dinner at the restaurant attached to his flat. He was haunted by the upturned face of the man who had been run over; and after he had done, being in no mood for reading or sleep, he walked the length of Victoria Street, and meditated on the inscrutable ways of Providence, which had taken the breadwinner of a necessitous family at a time his efforts were most needed.

He found that exercise eased his tension of mind, and continued in the direction of Trafalgar Square, until he was aware that a girl was standing directly in his path. She was looking about, as if uncertain of her whereabouts.

He stepped out of his way to avoid her. After

glancing timidly at his face, she made as if to address him.

It was not the first time he had been accosted in the streets by a woman at night, and he would have kept on his way had he not been a little unstrung by the events of the evening; moreover, he perceived that the girl had a sweetly innocent face.

Quillian half stopped, and, emboldened by this encouragement, the girl said:

"Could you please tell me if this is the way to Plumstead?"

"Plumstead?" he returned.

"I've lost my way in London, and must get there to-night."

"I'm afraid I can't tell you," he said.

"It's very near Woolwich, if you know where that is."

"I only know it's some way from here."

"It's so awkward! I really don't know what I shall do."

"Any policeman will direct you. I wish I could tell you myself."

"Thank you very much," she murmured, and made as if to seek information from a man who was approaching.

Disliking the idea of her speaking to one who might show her less consideration than he had done, he forestalled her and asked of the man if he knew the best way of getting to Plumstead.

"Train from Charing Cross," replied the man promptly. "And Charing Cross is five minutes from here. Along there on the right."

Quillian thanked the man, and was about to accompany the girl as far as the station, in order to protect her from harm.

"You needn't worry any more," he said.

She sadly shook her head.

"Why? What's the matter?"

She dropped her eyes (they were large and innocent and blue), and murmured:

"I—I haven't any money."

"No money?"

"I—I had some. But my purse was stolen this afternoon while I was sitting in the Park."

"Stolen! Was there much in it?"

"Not much; fifteen shillings."

"That needn't trouble you, if you do not mind my paying for your ticket."

"It's very, very kind of you."

"You'd better hurry"—she seemed inclined to linger—"it's getting late."

They walked in the direction of Charing Cross Station, and as they went along Whitehall Gardens he could not help noticing the slim grace of her figure, the tasteful neatness with which it was clad.

"How have you managed about food?" he asked.

"I've—I've had to go without."

"Are you hungry?"

"N-not very."

"I can get you something at the station. But you'd better eat it in the train, as it's very late."

"Why, what time is it?"

"Long past ten."

"So I thought."

"And surely that's very late for you to be out."

"O-of course."

"Have you far to go when you get to Plumstead?"

"I—I don't know."

"Don't know!"

"I lost the address in the purse that was stolen."

"What!" cried Quillian in dismay.

"It was the address of my aunt, and——"

"But don't you remember it?"

"She's just gone to a new address," she said, after the merest suspicion of hesitation.

"Then what are you going to do?"

"I shall have to ask."

"At this time of night?"

"What else can I do?" she returned helplessly.

"What is her name?" asked Quillian, after a few moments' thought.

"Manning."

"And if she has just moved to a new address, she's not likely to be known?"

"Perhaps not."

"Then what are you to do?"

"I—I don't know."

They arrived at the station just then, and he took her into the refreshment-room and bought her sandwiches, cakes, and lemonade. While she ate (he was surprised at seeing the small appetite she had) he sought to turn over in his mind the best thing to be done—sought because he was sorely troubled by the girl's extremity, and his own position in the matter.

It was unthinkable that he should give her money and let her shift for herself at that hour of the night, with nowhere to go, and in a city like London; for since she had told him how she was situated, if anything untoward happened to her, he would be largely, if not entirely, to blame.

On the other hand, he had himself to consider in having a young and pretty girl on his hands.

He thought of her sad plight, of the chapter of accidents which had left her helpless, of the perils that lay in wait for such as she, and reproached himself for his selfishness. The next moment, the good Guardian's repeated warnings flashed into his mind with regard to comely women, and he wondered if, after all, she was one of those who are out seeking whom they may devour.

He glanced at the young face, with the sweetly innocent blue eyes, and told himself that, if she were deceiving him, the Devil had selected a cunning instrument. She was nibbling a cake with an appealing disregard of danger.

He could not find it in his heart to think evil of her, but in order to still the doubtings of a worldly prudence he felt it was his duty to assume, he said:

"Do you mind if I ask you a few questions?"

"Questions!" she repeated, and looked at him with wondering eyes.

He was a little ashamed as he went on:

"About yourself."

"What do you want to know?" she asked, with artless surprise.

"I want to help you, but I don't know anything about

you," he returned, with a smile that would have won the most hesitating confidence.

"I'll tell you anything," she replied, with a flattering suspicion of emphasis on the pronoun.

"What is your name?"

"May Fothergill."

"Where have you come from?"

"To-day?"

"To-day, then?"

"Ealing."

"From friends?"

"I was in a situation there."

"May I ask what?"

"I was secretary to a dentist."

"Why did you leave?"

The girl's face became troubled.

"Do not tell me if you do not wish to," he said.

"I can tell you. He—he tried to kiss me, and—and——"

"He did!"

"I knew it wasn't right, and so I came away."

Quillian made a gesture of repulsion.

"Can such things be?" he asked a little later.

"And I should have been with auntie now if my purse hadn't been stolen."

"I quite understand that. Where do your parents live?"

"My father and mother are both dead."

"Haven't you any brothers or sisters?"

The girl shook her head.

"No other relations?"

"Only auntie."

"The question is, where are you to sleep to-night?" he said, after some moments' thought.

The girl paused in the act of putting a cake to her red lips.

"I could send you to an hotel, but there are, of course, objections to that."

She did not offer any comment, and he went on:

"And there are other places, *pensions*—boarding-houses you call them. But they would take objection to your going in so late whatever explanation I might make."

The girl still held her peace.

"I have a flat, and you might sleep there," he hazarded, and it seemed that the suggestion of a puzzled expression came into her face.

"Of course I could sleep elsewhere. But then there are objections to that, as not only would you be alone, but it would very naturally surprise the servants on their coming in the morning."

The big blue eyes looked at him in innocent surprise.

"I really don't know what is best to be done!" he sighed.

She did not offer to help him out, and he was considering first one thing and then another until he recalled the fact of the man Grumby having called upon him with reference to a situation in the afternoon. He had the man's address, and if Quillian could succeed in catching him before he went to bed, he might know of some respectable woman who would bear the girl company in the flat; on the morrow he would assist Miss Fothergill to trace her aunt.

"If you have finished we'll go at once," he said. "And as time is precious, we'll go in a cab—that is, if you don't mind."

She made not the slightest demur, and rose to her feet. Her simple trust dissipated any lingering doubts he may have had of her honesty, while the unseemly glances that men who were standing at the bar directed at Miss Fothergill strengthened his resolve to shield her from the perils of the night.

They entered a waiting cab, and as they were speeding to Grumby's address, which was in a mean street in the neighbourhood of Rochester Row, he said:

"You do not mind coming with me?"

"Why should I?" she returned.

"But you know nothing of me!"

"I know, but——"

"And for all you know to the contrary, I might be one of the worst men living."

"I—I don't understand."

"Don't understand!"

"What do you mean?"

"I've been reading terrible things lately in the papers, and perhaps you have too, of men and women who decoy young girls away and break them to lives of unspeakable infamy."

"I never read the papers," she told him.

"But you surely know of the dangers to which helpless girls are exposed in a great city!"

"What dangers?" she asked ingenuously.

"You mean to say you are ignorant?"

"You must think me very stupid, but I don't know a bit what you mean."

"Don't—don't you know anything of the harm unscrupulous men can inflict on a girl such as you—of the way they can destroy you, soul and body?"

"You must think me very silly, but I really don't know what you are talking about."

Quillian was wholeheartedly thankful that this child had been led to approach him, and not someone who might have taken advantage of her innocence.

"Haven't you ever had anyone to advise you?" he asked.

"How do you mean?"

"No sensible, good woman."

"I don't easily make friends," she replied.

The cab stopped in the street where Grumby lived. Telling the girl to remain seated, Quillian got out and commenced to look for the number, a matter of some difficulty, since most of the two-story houses were in darkness.

A woman standing at a doorway and talking to two or three others a little way along caught his attention. Thinking she might assist him in his search, and raising his hat, he asked her if she knew where Grumby lived.

"Next door, my dear," she told him. The familiarity was doubtless inspired by the unusual civility he had showed her.

Quillian knocked at the door of the apparently lifeless house. While he waited, he heard the woman he had spoken to realistically describing the details of a death-bed scene, and in a set manner which suggested she was repeating a familiar story.

Quillian, who was resolved to rouse Grumby from his bed, knocked again.

"Tell us about the death-rattle, Sarey," cried one of the women. "You've forgot that!"

"No, I ain't," indignantly returned the woman Quillian had spoken to.

"Yes, you 'ave."

"I ain't come to it yet."

"Ain't yer?"

"No, I ain't," she declared; and as if to punish the woman who had presumed to question the sequence of her narrative, she turned to Quillian and asked:

"Was you wanting Mr. Grumby?"

"Very particularly."

"I'm afraid he's hout."

"Not in bed?"

"Not 'im!"

"I suppose you could not tell me where I could be likely to find him?"

"I dessay I could, and if you likes to wait, me or one of these ladies would fetch 'im in two ticks."

"I should be so much obliged if one of you would."

"'Arf a mo', and I'll be back."

The woman set out, and by the time Quillian had walked to the cab to tell Miss Fothergill that he hoped he would not keep her waiting much longer, and had returned to the house where Grumby lived, the woman had come back.

"He—he ain't there," she said.

"Not?"

"Least, I couldn't see him; and no one could say where he was."

She gave Quillian the impression she was not speaking the truth; but there was nothing to be gained by doubting her word, and for want of knowing what else to do, he said:

"Could I speak to you a moment?"

"That you can, my dear."

He took her out of earshot of the others, told her as shortly as possible how he was situated, and asked her if she knew of a respectable woman who would bear them company in the flat for at least one night.

"They wants finding," she said.

"I suppose so," he remarked lamely. And then as he looked at the woman's honest, almost masculine face, he asked:

"I suppose you wouldn't care to come?"

"Me?"

"Yes."

"I think I could oblige you," she said off-handedly.

"Forgive my saying so, but I presume you are thoroughly trustworthy?"

"Me?"

"Yes."

"As hardworking a woman as ever stepped. An' if you don't b'leeve me, walk upstairs and see my 'usband, who's been bedridden and dependent on me for support this ever so long. But, thank Gawd, Gassmann has a pair of arms to keep 'im in comfort by charing."

"I'm sorry to hear of his affliction."

"It might be wuss. He may be took any time now."

"I should be sorry to take you away from him in case——"

"Work's work, altho' if he was to be took, I should miss the end," said Mrs. Gassmann regretfully.

"Still, I feel——"

"Don't you worry, my dear; I've paid 'is club money. I'll jess see he's all right for the night."

She went into the house without satisfying the curiosity of her friends. On returning a few minutes later, she said:

"Where's the young party?"

"In a cab farther——"

"In a keb, sir?" she interrupted quickly.

"Yes."

"Am I to ride in it too, sir?"

"If you don't mind."

"Mind! Hopes they sees me in it, sir, and pay Mrs. Kelly out for thinkin' I'd forgot the 'rattle.'"

Thus it came about that Miss Fothergill and Mrs. Gassmann were introduced to Quillian's flat. The char-woman became inordinately respectful on learning that her temporary employer was a man of substance, a respect

he could not help noticing that the girl he had befriended did not seem to share.

While Mrs. Gassmann prepared a room for herself and another for her employer's guest, Quillian had a further conversation with the latter, who did not appear in the least put out by the novel situation in which she found herself.

"You don't mind my asking you some more questions?" he began.

"More!" she laughed.

"I naturally want to know as much about you as I can."

The girl left the chair on which she had been sitting and knelt on the hearthrug to stroke a cat Quillian had befriended. She had removed her cloak and hat, and Quillian could not help noticing the slim grace of her figure, the profusion of pretty brown hair which was tastefully arranged on her shapely head, the lace about her wrists; at the same time he had an impression that she was making an unnecessary display of her hands, which were white and small.

"Where were you born?"

"London."

"London's a big place."

"I don't care about speaking of all that," she faltered.

"Do not tell me if you don't wish to."

There was a silence, broken by her saying in a burst of confidence:

"I don't mind telling you."

"Thank you. The more I know about you, the more I shall be in a position to help you."

"I was born in Half Moon Street."

"Where is that?"

"Don't you know?" she asked in some surprise.

"I haven't been very long in London."

"Oh! That accounts for it. It's a turning off Piccadilly."

"Then your parents were well off?"

"Very, for a time."

"Then they lost their money?"

"Everything."

"And you say they are dead?"

"They died soon after."

"I suppose of grief at their troubles!" he said sympathetically.

The pretty brown head bent over the fire.

"And your aunt?" he urged a little later.

"She is only a—a half-sister of my mother. Not a real aunt."

"Is she married?"

"I—I think so."

"Don't you know?"

"I know very little about her."

"But didn't you say her name was Mrs. Manning?"

"Of course."

"Then she must be married?"

"Of course. How stupid of me!"

"Were you educated in England?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Southsea."

"Could I write to the head-mistress or any clergyman who knew you?"

"Of course."

"Then you could give me their names to-morrow?"

"If I remember them."

"But——"

"I never can remember names."

There was a silence, during which Quillian was aware of an uneasiness of spirit, and just now he did not care about accounting for it.

"Anyway," he presently went on, there is a man coming here to-morrow—an elderly man—who will go with you to Plumstead and help you find your aunt."

"I do hope we shall," she said wistfully.

"Of course, if you don't you must come back here, and I'll try and arrange for Mrs. Gassmann to sleep here again. If she cannot, I must get someone else."

"Will you be here to-morrow?"

"To-morrow, yes. The next day I'm going away."

"Oh!"

"Only for a week or so. If you do not find your aunt, you must stay here till you do, and we must then talk over the best thing to be done."

She did not reply, and he was again a little surprised at her taking all these arrangements quite as a matter of course. He told himself, however, that this argued an appealing trustfulness, a belief that was doubtless assisted by Miss Fothergill's comeliness.

Mrs. Gassmann came into the room to say that the young lady's room was ready if she wanted to go to bed. Quillian looked inquiringly at Miss Fothergill.

"I think I will, if you don't mind. I'm rather tired."

"And you've plenty to do to-morrow!"

"Good-night," she smiled.

"Good-night and God bless you!" returned Quillian.

"Shall I come with you?" asked Mrs. Gassmann of Miss Fothergill.

"I can manage all right," said the younger woman, and with a hint of ungraciousness in her voice.

She went to the door, turned to smile at Quillian, and disappeared.

A somewhat long silence was broken by Quillian remarking:

"I hope you will be comfortable, Mrs. Gassmann?"

"I shall be all right, sir," she returned almost defiantly.

"A terrible thing a girl like that being alone in London!"

"Sir!"

Quillian repeated his remark.

"May I ask who does for you here, sir?"

"Attendance is included."

"But wot sort of attendance?"

"I haven't any reason to complain, so far."

"If you 'ave, you know where to find a 'ard-working woman with a strong pair of arms she knows how to use."

"That reminds me: I may want you to sleep in to-morrow night, and perhaps every other night for a week or so."

"I don't mind obliging you, sir."

"Because, if Miss Fothergill stays on, I want you to look after her while I'm away, as, of course, she cannot have her meals in the restaurant."

"Then it isn't to look after you, sir?"

"Miss Fothergill. The chances are she will find her

relations to-morrow, but in any case I promise you you will have no reason to complain."

"Maybe, sir, but—but——!"

"But what?"

"I'm more used to looking after gentlemen than ladies," said Mrs. Gassmann sullenly.

"For all we know to the contrary, Miss Fothergill may find her aunt to-morrow."

"Sir!"

"I said Miss Fothergill may find her aunt to-morrow."

Upon Mrs. Gassmann keeping silent, and looking at him with a wooden expression, he added:

"It's more likely than not."

"I 'ope she will," sniffed Mrs. Gassmann.

"What!"

"I 'ope she will!" said Mrs. Gassmann as before.

CHAPTER VI

"COURTS"

"AND what are your plans at present?"

"I shall not stay much longer than a week."

"Only a week?" asked Father Akhurst in surprise.

"There is so much to do."

"So I understand."

"Why do you smile?"

"The purpose for which you left Ypres."

"I was not referring to that. Not by any means."

"Not?" returned Father Akhurst coldly.

"Not."

The two men reached the end of the walk in the Italian garden before the priest spoke and said:

"As your spiritual adviser, may I ask what is in your mind?"

"That is very soon told. Before I dare to ask any woman to share her life with mine, I must prove myself worthy," declared Quillian.

"How do you propose to set about doing that?" returned the priest.

Quillian would have liked to have opened his heart to the man at his side, and have asked his counsel with regard to the best means of serving his kind with the wealth Providence had seen fit to trust him with; he was held back by the strong condemnation the priest had extended to his desultory reading, which had included books on the "Index"; by the lack of human sympathy in Father Akhurst's nature; and by the hardening of his manner should Quillian touch on anything that had not the Church and its multitudinous charities for its first consideration.

"First of all, I want first-hand authority with life," said Quillian.

"At the risk of being infected with the poison of latter-day thought?"

"There is little to be done if there is no chance of receiving wounds," returned Quillian.

"Has it not occurred to you that the Church can supply all the knowledge you need?"

Quillian did not at once reply, and the priest repeated his question.

"May I be candid with you?"

"It is your duty to be."

"Before I was absolved from my vows, I was afflicted with doubts of——"

"Doubts!" interrupted the other sharply.

"Of the wisdom of my vocation."

Father Akhurst made a gesture of annoyance. Quillian went on:

"I admit I did what I did with my eyes open. But one does not know very much at sixteen, the year I was taken."

"You could have gone back during your novitiate."

"I only saw life from one angle, and——"

"That is a subject I am forbidden to discuss. And as it is all over and done with, it would serve no purpose. Say you return and do what is in your mind: you will gradually acquire a taste for these plausible writings of freethinkers."

"Freethinkers!"

"Are not those works you confessed to having studied the writing of men outside the Church?"

"They are frequently men of a wide humanity; a wider knowledge: and it doesn't by any means follow that——"

"I do not care to discuss them."

"Have you read any?"

"I should be ashamed to admit having done so."

Quillian thought it wiser to hold his peace, and the other, perhaps thinking he had spoken with impolitic harshness, changed the subject for the time being, and said:

"And what do you think of your home?"

"I cannot look at it often enough."

"And it looks its best on a fine summer morning."

The two men turned and gazed at the house across the intervening expanse of lawns, and once more Quillian sought to appraise its appealing picturesqueness.

It was long and low, and built of red bricks, and roofed with dull blue slates which shone genially in the sunlight; the wings were farther advanced than the centre portion, and the space that was thus enclosed was bordered by a balustrade from which flights of steps descended to the gardens: away on the left was a lake, and beside much of this was a forest of fir-trees which were sternly reflected in its depths.

"It seems a typical English home," said Quillian presently.

"It is your duty to make it so," returned Father Akhurst.

Quillian was not a little moved by the domestic suggestions of the place, and was in the mood to make amends for the unfortunate impression he felt sure he had made on the priest; consequently he said:

"And how would you advise me to set about it?"

"That is very soon told," replied the other. "You spoke of worthiness! What more worthy object could you achieve than in devoting much of your substance to the honour and glory of the Church?"

"Of course I shall do all that is necessary for the charities my relatives founded."

"I mean apart from them."

Quillian looked inquiringly at Father Akhurst, who went on:

"I mean by rearing and endowing a foundation that would be a means of spreading the light of the true faith in this district, and one that would make your name revered by all good Catholics."

Upon Quillian making no reply, Father Akhurst added:

"It would be some slight return for the much that has been given."

"It is a matter that cannot be decided at once," declared Quillian lamely.

"Prayer and taking counsel with those who are set in

authority over you should lead you into the right way. Then, having proved your worthiness, I could give you excellent advice with regard to whom you should marry."

Quillian metaphorically pricked up his ears.

"That is one of the reasons I am sorry you are making such a very short stay," continued the other.

"Indeed!"

"You have several Catholic neighbours: I have two families in my mind, in either of which you will find the wife you are in need of. It is a great pity you cannot change your mind."

"I shall have to return for a day or two," said Quillian (he was thinking of Miss Fothergill, who had not yet succeeded in finding her aunt), "but I could come back after."

"I advise all young men who come to me to marry as early as possible. And if it is a safeguard for them, how much more is it for one such as you, who is young, rich, inexperienced!"

"The Guardian at Ypres warned me before I came away."

"As you know, he wrote to me; he is very, very anxious on your behalf."

"There is no occasion to be."

"He knows you better than you do yourself. But there is a Miss Wenborn here. Her father was not born in the Faith, but was converted by his wife. I am anxious for you to meet them."

"I should like to—on my return."

"They already know of you. Miss Wenborn has consulted me about taking vows."

"If she wishes to be a nun——" began Quillian, who had a masculine objection to having his wife chosen for him.

"She will be advised by me," interrupted the priest shortly.

"And then there are the three Miss Lownes," he continued after an interval of silence. "The one who wins the eldest for his own will have a veritable treasure."

"Is she so attractive?"

"Mercia Lownes is good, accomplished, beautiful. What more can man want?"

"Love," said Quillian hesitatingly, and in a low voice.

"Is that essential?"

"It would be to me."

"How can you know what love is?"

"Whether they experience it or not, it is what most men feel they need," returned Quillian.

"Well, well," said Father Akhurst impatiently, "that all lies in the future. But if—if I can be of service to you in this or any other respect, it is in my mind to ask something in return."

"And that?"

"Amongst other things, you have inherited a very fine library, which contains all too many works of which our Church rightly disapproves. I often reproached your late relative on this score, but he was by way of being a scholar, and would not listen."

"Well!" said Quillian, upon the other pausing.

"If I succeeded in being of great service to you, I should beg your permission to weed out much of which I disapprove."

Quillian returned a non-committal reply; very soon after, Father Akhurst took his leave.

Quillian strolled thoughtfully towards the house: he could not blame the priest for what he now considered the narrowness of his views, since he was only too well aware that his training and environment had set hard and fast limits to his horizon: Quillian was much more engrossed by what he had heard of the perfections of Mercia Lownes, and marvelled if it were she whom Providence had selected to be his mate.

He walked up a flight of the steps leading to the forecourt, and, crossing this, entered the big, panelled hall, passed the age-blackened oak staircase with its carved balustrade, and went into the library—the library in which Father Akhurst was eager to sift the unrighteous chaff from the orthodox grain.

Quillian loved the almost startling repose of this place, which seemed impervious to the increasing unrest of the world without; the stately house had an atmosphere of

permanence, but it was as nothing compared to the unruffled calm provided by the rows upon rows of leather-bound books upon the shelves and in the great oak cases which cumbered the floor: perhaps this was largely caused by the accumulation of thought and imagination and emotion for which the volumes stood, which the efforts of narrow-minded or revolutionary destructiveness could never quite efface.

Quillian was cursed or blessed with a natural humility; but his normal appreciation of his insignificance in the scheme of things was appallingly enhanced upon his contemplating the vast wealth of knowledge which stared him in the face, a wealth of knowledge which it was quite impossible for one person to assimilate in the span doled out to the human unit.

For the time being, the purpose for which he had left the monastery, the perfections of Mercia Lownes were forgotten: it was in his mind to devote his days to scholarship, even if by so doing all he ultimately won was an abiding belief in his limitations.

But only for a while, for soon his senses were alive to the subtle influences about him.

Ever so long ago (it was in the early days of his entering the seminary) he had been moved to authorship, but had soon given up on realizing his pitiful lack of a necessary knowledge of his species; and on account of the discouragement of his pastors and masters.

These early efforts had taught him, however, the extent to which imaginative writers were dependent for their material on their environment: if this were so, and he intuitively believed it to be the case, the heaped-up erudition and fancy with which he was surrounded was the quintessence of life in varying periods of the world's history: and much of it was inspired by the emotions of the soul (Quillian did not forget that love was the most considerable), and fired by the flame of genius.

Even as Quillian was sensible of these things, it was as though the atmosphere of the library was full of intangible whispers from some of the phases of existence which lived between the covers of many of the books; they buzzed about his brain, and in a very little while they set

up a kaleidoscope of impressions; a kaleidoscope in which glimpses of the days that had been were all jumbled together.

It seemed as if he were watching living pictures which were mishandled by a drunken operator.

One moment, he was witnessing episodes, and of the heroic sort, from the life of the ancient world; the next, he was mingling with the groundlings of an Elizabethan theatre, and marvelling at their coarse vitality.

A vision of St. John preaching in the wilderness was followed by a sight of the cruel splendour of Carthage, with its masts, and temples, and quays; and this was blotted out by the adventures of greatly daring spirits in new and hitherto undreamed-of worlds.

The struggles of mailed crusaders against the infidel; the hard-fought battles of forgotten ships in uncharted seas; the Emperor Hadrian trudging at the head of his legions to visit his far-flung dominions; the despair of prophets at their messages falling on ears that would not hearken; the downfall of Empires which seemed to shake the earth to its foundations; the ceaseless cries of the downtrodden, were all set before him.

And ever woven like a silk thread in a coarse woof was an eternal tale of love which had made holy and of good report the orgy of lust and bloodshed which, just now, seemed to have been the chief preoccupation of his kind.

A fair face infrequently looked into his; more than once he repeated two lines he had lately chanced upon:

'Was this the face that launched a thousand ships,
And burnt the topless towers of Ilium!'

But one and all passed, and left him weary; not enough, however, to stop him from suffering from a further and more comprehensive knowledge of his stupendous littleness when compared to the sum of things that were and had been.

And the impressions that had faded into nothingness were in the nature of a symbol of all earthly striving and winning, which, in the ruthless passing of time, all died away and became as things of naught.

This conviction of personal insignificance and sense of

futility were not altogether unhelpful in his present frame of mind; they brought home to him the wisdom of making the most of his lot, even if it were merely in the nature of a defiance to the obstacles he had to face. Only by such means could he justify his life to its Giver.

Quillian started from his reverie; a servant had entered the room.

"Sir Percy and Miss Philbrick, sir," said the man.

"Who are they?" returned Quillian.

"Neighbours, sir. They come from Croft Park."

"Have you shown them in?"

"Sir Percy's in the hall, sir. The lady won't come in, as she's dogs in the car."

Quillian, with some misgivings with regard to his ability to meet people of some importance on common social ground, hastened into the hall, where he saw a stoutish, elderly, kindly, not very intelligent-looking man staring at one of the pictures.

"Hope you don't mind my calling," said Sir Percy, a little nervously. "But Beatrice insisted, and—and—there you are."

"It is very kind of you. Won't your daughter come in?"

"Thanks, but, as usual, we're full up with dogs—in fact, we're on our way to a show. But she'd like a word with you."

"Can she spare the time?"

"Sure you don't mind dogs?"

"I love them."

"Eh!"

"The house isn't ready for people, but I should be delighted if she would come in."

"Dogs and all?"

"Dogs and all."

The two men went without the door, where, reclining in a motor-car, and caressing a dog, was a young woman whom Quillian for a moment or two considered very handsome until he was aware of a suggestion of an almost brutal (in one so otherwise fair) resolve in the lower part of her countenance. A stoutish, middle-aged man, with a fat red face, was by her side; one of his hands was

tugging a tiny moustache, and the other was fondling a dog that lay across his knees.

"My daughter, Beatrice," said her father. "Chalfont, do you know Quillian?"

"Hope you don't mind our turnin' up like this?" cried Miss Philbrick, who appeared a very self-possessed young woman.

"It is very good of you to come," returned Quillian. "But won't you come in?"

"Perhaps you mind dogs! I told father to mention it, but he's sure to forget."

Before Quillian could reply, Sir Percy said:

"But I did tell him; I did mention it, didn't I?"

"You did," declared Quillian. "And I said I hadn't the least objection."

The chauffeur opened the door, and Miss Philbrick and Chalfont got out; they were followed by some half-dozen beautiful dogs of varying breeds, which streamed after them.

"Perhaps you're 'doggy'!" suggested Miss Philbrick to Quillian as they entered the house.

"I beg your pardon."

"Perhaps you're 'doggy'!"

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

"Are you keen on dogs?"

"I'm very fond of them."

"You don't 'show'—dog shows, I mean?"

"No. I'm afraid things are rather in confusion here. I've only come for the shortest of visits."

"Lucky we got you. But hearin' you were here, I was determined to come, although father was against it."

"My dear!" urged Sir Percy.

"You know you were."

"Not in the way you appear to mean."

"I'll tell you all about it, and then we'll all know—come here, Roger" (this to one of the dogs)—"we'll know where we are."

"Please do," said Quillian, who was sure he would never be a match for this young woman's forcefulness.

"I'm startin' a County Canine Society," Miss Philbrick went on. "And as we're all drivin' over to the Ashford

Show this afternoon, I decided to look in and ask if you'd be a Vice-President, or let us have your name in some way."

"I should be very pleased to help you if I thought I should be the least use."

"That's all right," she remarked off-handedly. "All I want is a few names to make a start. Tommy and father are honorary secretaries."

"Tommy!"

"Tommy Chalfont. Everybody calls him Tommy."

"But——" began Quillian.

"You're not goin' to back out of it now?"

"I was merely going to say I know so little about dogs."

"Then you'd better come with us."

"To-day?"

"Why not?"

"Must you go?"

"Of course," she declared, and as if not a little surprised by his question.

"I was hoping you'd stay. And you might have some tea."

"Impossible," she said decidedly.

"But, my dear!" feebly protested her father.

"You know we're late as it is."

"Still!"

"Just look at Clement. Why don't you keep an eye on him, father?" she cried, and referring to a dog which was bent on going up the stairway.

"He won't do any harm," said Quillian.

"I know. I was frightened of losin' him," she returned.

Sir Percy very energetically, and Chalfont languidly, secured the errant dog, and this accomplished, Beatrice said:

"We must be off. Are you comin'?"

"I don't know what to say."

"Say you'll come, and it'll do you good, as you'll pick up somethin' about dogs."

Quillian could not make up his mind until decision was taken out of his hands by Miss Philbrick, who said:

"I want you to come. Now then, father: you and Tommy see to the dogs."

There was no denying her. Quillian got into a thick coat for the ride, and upon his joining Miss Philbrick, he said:

"Are you exhibiting to-day?"

"Where?"

"At Ashford."

"Ashford!" she cried scornfully.

"I'm sorry if I've said anything amiss."

"As if I'd 'show' at a rotten little hole like that! I wouldn't even go to the judgin'. I'm only goin' to look at a dog I'm thinkin' of buyin' for stud."

They and the dogs got into the car, Chalfont sitting in front, and Quillian behind between Sir Percy and his daughter.

One dog was given to Chalfont to nurse, another to Sir Percy, and a third to Quillian; as Miss Philbrick handed it to him, she said:

"You'd better look after Jessie."

"Am I competent to look after him?" inquired Quillian.

"It's a 'she'; Jessie is a bitch," she returned promptly.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"That's all right. Keep an eye on father: he's always so careless."

"My dear!" protested Sir Percy.

"If you live to a thousand, you'll never know how to handle a dog," she declared.

Quillian was more glad than otherwise he was going to the dog show: in addition to cultivating the acquaintance of his future neighbours, he might get an opportunity of asking someone's advice with regard to the best means of obtaining congenial employment for Miss Fothergill in the event of her failing to find her aunt.

"What dogs do you exhibit?" he asked of Miss Philbrick.

"Don't you know?" she asked in some surprise.

"Why should I?"

"I thought everyone knew, at least, about here. I'm in 'Poms,' and 'Skips,' and White West Highland Aberdeen Terriers; I was in 'Cockers' and 'Flat-

Coated Retrievers,' and am thinking of goin' in for 'Bedlington's.' "

" It's all meaningless to me."

" You'll soon get into it if you've anythin' in you."

Quillian made some commonplace remarks, to which Miss Philbrick returned absent-minded replies, until she suddenly said:

" Talk to father. A pedigree's worryin' me."

Quillian did as he was told, and Sir Percy seemed thankful to have someone to speak to.

" Do you like motoring ?" he asked of Quillian.

" Yes. But it's all so new to me."

" So I understand."

" And one is always told to distrust the charm of newness. Do you like it ?"

" When Beatrice doesn't insist on going beyond the speed limit."

They passed the entrance-gates of a park; the gate pillars were surmounted by a heraldic device.

" Know who lives there ?" asked Sir Percy.

" The Lownes ?" hazarded Quillian.

" They live the other way. That's where Vaucourt lives—Lord Vaucourt—Tommy's father."

" Indeed !"

" Do you know the Lownes ?"

" Only from Father Akhurst having mentioned them."

" We may see some of them at the show."

" Isn't there a Miss Mercia Lownes ?"

" She's the eldest: then comes Maud; and then there's Joan. Joan's sure to be at the show: she loves dogs."

" What's that ?" asked Miss Philbrick.

" I was speaking of Joan Lownes and saying how fond she was of dogs."

" Joan doesn't know a dog from an otter !" cried Miss Philbrick scornfully.

" She has several, dear."

" If you call them dogs. Don't argue: I'm tryin' to think."

Sir Percy shifted nervously in his seat, and for a time stared at the fields and woods the car was swiftly passing: on approaching a quaint, ivy-covered house, with very

tall chimneys, which faced them as they approached a bend in the road, Quillian said:

"Who lives there?"

"The Wenborn's: delightful old place," replied Sir Percy.

"Father Akhurst spoke of them."

"He's always there."

"Dreadful people!" cried Beatrice.

"My dear!"

"Won't have a dog in the house."

Quillian had an impression that the man at his side suppressed a sigh, and a little later Miss Philbrick asked of Tommy Chalfont:

"Who was the dam of Canterbury Rival?"

"Give it up," returned Tommy.

"Was it Beresford Jessie or Beresford Beauty?"

"Give it up."

"I suppose you don't know, father?"

"Let me see, was it er—er, was it Beresford Beauty?" he hesitated.

"You think it was?"

"Y-yes, my dear."

"Then it's sure to be Beresford Jessie. You're always wrong."

CHAPTER VII

NEIGHBOURS

ON arrival at the Town Hall, where the dog show was being held, Beatrice said that the men must take it in turns to sit in the car in order to keep an eye on the dogs, so that these last might not feel lonely; Tommy Chalfont was deputed to stay first, and the Philbricks and Quillian approached the building from which came the incessant barking of dogs.

This noise increased as they came to the entrance, and was almost deafening upon their getting inside, where Miss Philbrick seemed to know all sorts and conditions of men and women, many of whom crowded about her, and asked her a thousand and one questions on doggy subjects.

Quillian and Sir Percy could hardly hear each other speak. The former wondered how long he would be able to stand the barking and the smell peculiar to dog shows, and hoped his turn would soon arrive to take his watch without. Miss Philbrick approached with a couple of catalogues (she had a third under her arm), and after giving one to her father and another to Quillian, she said:

"I want father to go round and mark those who're 'in the money.' After he's done that, I want him to try and learn the different dogs. Directly he sees a face, he forgets all about it. Do try and keep him up to the scratch."

Thus bidden, the two men set off, Sir Percy with an air of determination to do his utmost to satisfy his daughter.

"Wonderful girl, Beatrice," he said, on coming to the benches reserved for "Black Field Spaniels."

"She seems quite remarkable," assented Quillian.

"Astonishing memory for dogs. No matter where we may be at a show, no matter what dog comes along, she says, 'There goes so-and-so.' And she's always right."

"Indeed!"

"I'm not gifted to anything like the same extent: indeed, scarcely at all; and that's where Beatrice has a failing: she—she refuses to make allowances."

Quillian made a non-committal reply.

"It's no use maintaining the contrary—as we're going to be neighbours, and I hope to be friends—I may as well make a clean breast of it: I'm not absolutely reliable for making a note of who's who, as it were, to-day. I shall get into dreadful trouble to-night, and—and——"

"Yes?" said Quillian, upon the other hesitating.

"If—if your head doesn't ache too much—mine's fit to burst already; it always does—you might very kindly keep a sort of an eye on me, and see I don't make too many mistakes."

"I've had no experience at this sort of thing. But I'll do my best."

"You really will?"

"Why not?"

"That is good of you: 'pon my word it is! You see, Beatrice sometimes gets very nasty at my mistakes—particularly if she's showing and only gets a 'V.H.C.' or 'H.C.': and—and sometimes the worry of it all keeps me awake at night."

Quillian was surprised to find what a simple job it was: it was merely a matter of comparing the number on the bench with the numbered entry in the catalogue; and if a card announced that the dog had secured a prize, to make a note of what it had won against its name: with his assistance, they made rapid progress—at least, so thought Sir Percy, for he said:

"'Pon my word, it's astonishing what we're doing; at least, what you are: for I don't mind telling you, I shouldn't have got on nearly so fast by myself."

"Really!"

"You don't think so! But then you haven't the fear of Beatrice's displeasure hanging over your head. That makes me nervous."

Later, and after Sir Percy's catalogue was scored with quite a lot of marks, he said:

"Would you do me a favour?"

"Of course I will if I can."

Sir Percy became confidential, and said:

"Don't—please don't say too much to Beatrice about your having given me a hand. I should never hear the last of it."

"I promise."

"Thank you: thank you: how lucky we were to find you in!" declared Sir Percy, and added as an after-thought: "Beatrice is the dearest girl in the world until it comes to dogs: it's only then she's a 'bit difficult.'"

Now and again they would come upon Miss Philbrick, who was usually laying down 'doggy' law, often seated sideways on a bench with a dog for object lesson, and listened to with much respect by her mixed acquaintances.

"How's your head?" asked Sir Percy presently.

"I'm getting more used to it," returned Quillian.

"I wish mine were. But, if you like, you can go outside now and take your turn. I don't see why Tommy should have all the fun."

"The fun?"

"The fresh air," quickly corrected Sir Percy.

"As your head's bad, you take your turn."

"Wouldn't hear of it; 'pon my word, I wouldn't! Should never forgive myself if I were so selfish."

Quillian had his way, however, for the other was not very hard to persuade; Tommy Chalfont left the car and remarked to Quillian, whom he joined:

"Old Philbrick's 'fed up.'"

"He complains of his head."

"He always does in no time. He's not half a bad old sportsman, but he can't stick dog shows and no wonder: sort of has 'em in the house all the year round."

"How do you mean?"

"You haven't been there?"

"I only met you all to-day."

"Stoopid of me to forget. Wait till you go there; you'll see for yourself fast enough."

"I don't suppose I shall just yet. I'm only here for a short time."

"Goin' back to town?"

"Yes."

"I hope to run up next week. Feel I shall die if I don't see a bit of life."

"Are you so fond of London?"

"Ain't you?"

"It has its drawbacks."

"You wouldn't say that if you knew my people."

"Indeed!"

"How long have you been in town?"

"About a month."

"Seen much life?"

"A great deal."

"Eh?"

"One cannot help doing so if one keeps one's eyes open in London."

"Wonder if you know as much of life in town as I do!" said Tommy complacently.

"I've been to the Tower; Westminster Abbey; the Zoo; and the National Gallery; Kensington Palace——!"

"Good Lord!" ejaculated the other.

"I suppose you know them by heart!"

"To tell you the truth, I've never seen one of 'em. I don't mean that sort of place at all: I mean where you see Life."

"Oh!" said Quillian blankly: he was beginning to divine what the other was driving at.

"Theatres; music-halls; all that sort of thing."

Undeterred by the other's silence, Tommy went on:

"You mayn't believe it, but I know three actresses, and any number of actors. And if it weren't such hard work, I'd like to be on the stage myself."

"As an actor?"

"Comedian. I'd like to do a bit of that sort of thing down here, but there's nothin' 'arty ever doin' in this dull hole."

"Is it so dull?"

"Wait till you've been here a month, if you can stick it so long. That's why I'm off to town at the end of next

week; and if you're on, I should be only too pleased to show you round."

Rather to Chalfont's surprise, Quillian did not jump at this offer, and to turn a distasteful subject, and to mention a matter that was of considerable interest to him, he said:

"I suppose you know the Lownes?"

"Rather!"

"Sir Percy mentioned some of them might be here to-day."

"Shouldn't be surprised."

"Isn't there a Miss Mercia Lownes?"

"She wouldn't be here," declared Chalfont, with conviction.

"Indeed!"

"Not that sort at all: sort of girl who's much too good for this world," he said, with an inflection of disparagement in his voice.

Quillian wondered if Chalfont's censure were in the nature of a compliment to a high-minded young woman; a moment or two later, his companion said:

"Here she is!"

"The one we were talking about?"

"Lord no: her sister."

A rather horsily dressed young woman, with small eyes and a large mouth, but who was otherwise rather nice-looking, smiled at Chalfont, left a man who was with her, and came over to Quillian's companion.

"Wondered if you'd be here," she remarked. "Seen anythin' of Joan?"

"Nothin'," replied Chalfont, and forthwith introduced the second Miss Lownes to Quillian.

"We've heard a lot about you," she remarked in rather a loud voice, at least, so Quillian thought.

"Is that so?" he asked in some surprise.

"Father Akhurst; if it hadn't been for him, it would have made no difference; news of one's neighbours so quickly runs round."

Quillian made a commonplace remark, and the young woman asked:

"But how on earth did you get to a 'show' like this?"

Quillian explained how he had come to be present, and on asking her if she liked dogs, she replied:

"Only if they're well bred."

"Quillian was askin' if Mercia were likely to be here," said Chalfont.

"What!" cried Maud in astonishment.

"Fact."

"Not really?"

"Really."

"Mercia at a dog show! That's the best joke I've heard for many a long day."

"Thought you'd see it," grinned Chalfont.

Quillian, who did not much care for the Miss Lownes he had met, again wondered if the depreciation of her sister implied by her manner of speech were a testimony to Mercia's worth.

Quillian was conscious of a lack of sympathy between Maud Lownes and himself; he suspected her of being material, and tried to think of a means of joining Sir Percy who was still keeping watch without.

"Here's Joan!" cried Maud Lownes. "I've been expectin' her all the afternoon;" and Quillian was introduced to Maud's younger sister.

In appearance, manner, and atmosphere, Joan was a striking contrast to Maud; indeed, if Quillian had not been told, he would not have taken them for sisters: Joan was shorter; had not unpleasing, irregular features, which were set off with fine wild eyes; and was dressed anyhow with a tam-o'-shanter hat upon her masses of red hair: she nodded and slightly smiled to Quillian, and then looked away; she gave him the impression that she was shy.

"Where have you been, Joan?" asked Maud sharply.

"Been for a ride round."

"I expected you hours ago."

Upon her sister failing to reply, Maud added:

"But it's just like you: you never can do anythin' like other people."

The place seemed getting momentarily fuller, and as they made their way through the press, Quillian noticed that Joan took every opportunity of fondling the dogs

on the benches, many of which ardently returned her caresses.

Quillian, so far as he was able, kept by her side, and sought to engage her in conversation; this was by no means easy, as she replied in shy monosyllables to his remarks: for instance, upon his asking:

"Do you like dogs?"

"Rather!" she replied.

"Have you any?"

"Several."

"Do you exhibit them?"

"Never."

"Why?"

"They're mongrels."

"Are you fond of them?"

"Rather."

Notwithstanding this shortness, Quillian believed the girl had an unusual nature and that her friendship was worth the seeking.

On reaching the end of the hall that abutted on the street, they ran into Miss Philbrick, who barely acknowledged the greetings of the Lownes girls, and said to Quillian:

"Where's father?"

"Waiting outside."

"I've had enough if you have."

"I'm quite ready to go."

"Not a dog worth looking at in the place."

She communicated her intention to the others and, leaving the building, they came upon Sir Percy standing by the car; he was keeping an eye on the dogs, and trying to look as if he liked it.

"We've met before to-day," he said to Joan.

"Where?" asked Maud.

"She drove up while I was waiting here; didn't you, Joan?"

But Joan's attention was attracted by a dog that bore a possible resemblance to a fox terrier; he was barking with delight at catching sight of his mistress from the seat of an adjacent car.

"Surely you didn't bring Jack!" cried Maud.

"Why not?" returned Joan.

"You ought to know it's very bad form to be seen out of doors with a dog like that."

Joan was not deterred from caressing her pet; after Maud had said good-bye to the Philbricks, Chalfont, and Quillian, and Joan had waved a comprehensive farewell, Sir Percy said:

"After we've dropped Tommy, we'll get back."

"Do let's hurry," urged his daughter. "I want to know how Canterbury Susan and Canterbury Folly are getting on."

"You're coming back to dinner with us!" said Sir Percy to Quillian.

"But——" began Quillian, and was interrupted by Sir Percy, who said:

"Please don't disappoint us."

"But you dress for dinner, and——"

"It's all arranged," said Miss Philbrick decisively. "I wish you to come back, and someone will drive you home."

There was no denying Miss Philbrick; Quillian, who welcomed this opportunity of learning more of his neighbours, said:

"It's very kind of you."

"You and father can amuse each other if I have any dogs to see to."

It was some minutes before they started, for Miss Philbrick had much to say to 'doggy' people who were coming out of the hall; most of their conversation was in a language of which Quillian understood little, and had to do with 'classes,' judges' failings and the best diet for, and cures of ailments of, dogs.

He was amused by a little man in high gaiters, who touched his cap upon Miss Philbrick addressing him, and said:

"Just off to the post-office, miss, to wire home."

"Your wins?" she asked.

"Y-yes."

"But you're not 'in the money.'"

"I know, miss; but it looks well for my kennel."

Miss Philbrick did not seem in the best of tempers on the way home: she rated her father for any and every

thing; she did not know why she had gone to 'such a rotten little show,' or went in at all for dogs: the judges were either unfair or incompetent; and no breeder had a good word to say for anyone else's dogs: Quillian, who was doing all he might to increase his slender knowledge of the eternal feminine, wondered what had brought about her displeasure.

He was not left long in doubt, for she presently said to her father:

"Why did you advise me to sell Canterbury Belle?"

"But I didn't, my dear," he replied.

"You didn't! I'm certain you did."

"My dear!"

"It's no use denying it: I remember it all perfectly: I couldn't quite make up my mind, and you said something which made me decide."

"I told you not to sell her, as you might regret it."

"I know. And as you're always wrong, I got rid of her at once."

"What's happened to Canterbury Belle?" asked Tommy Chalfont from his seat in front.

"She's winning everywhere. Two firsts and a special at Bristol; and took everything at Birmingham."

The car pulled up outside a gate of Lord Vaucourt's park, and after this was opened sped up an avenue of elms towards a house in the distance: Quillian noticed that the grass was poor and the road ill-kept; away from the drive, many of the trees had recently been felled.

"Won't you come in?" asked Tommy, on being set down in front of a great, barrack-like house.

"Not now; we're late as it is," returned Miss Philbrick.

"Hope we'll see somethin' of you before you go," said Tommy to Quillian. "I'm sure you and father would hit it off: he's a sort of brainy hermit, if you can 'stick' that sort of thing."

"Strange man, Vaucourt," remarked Sir Percy, after they were again off. "Shuts himself up and hardly ever sees his own family; and he's impoverished himself for the Church."

"My housekeeper was talking of him. He's an earl, isn't he?"

"Yes: Tommy is the second son: Ashford, the elder, lives there with his wife."

Quillian might have learned further particulars of the Vaucourt family had not Miss Philbrick again returned to the subject of her hobby.

"Wonder if I shall have any luck when I get back!" she began.

"With Canterbury Barbara! I don't see why you shouldn't," returned her father, who added for Quillian's behoof: "Beatrice has a dog showing at Dublin to-day."

Before Quillian could offer any remark, she said:

"Challis is judgin', and he always 'judges at the other end of the chain.'"

"What might that mean?" asked Quillian.

"Don't you know?"

"I'm afraid I don't."

"He gives a prize to a dog who's been shown by a pretty face."

For the rest of the way Miss Philbrick urged Quillian not to 'go in for dogs,' telling him novices at dog-breeding were cunningly encouraged to extend their operations by being given small prizes at third-rate shows; and that afterwards, one had no chance of winning anything appreciable unless one were appointed a judge, since judges made a point of giving awards to those who would be likely to do them a like service in return: she ended by saying:

"Isn't that so, father?"

"Scarcely so bad as that, my dear."

"You know it's ever so much worse."

"There's always the Kennel Club."

"Now you're really funny, father," she told him.

Elham Manor, where the Philbricks lived, seemed more devoted to dogs than to human beings, for wherever Quillian went, he came upon them. Several times he nearly fell, from the fact of their getting between his legs: there were ailing dogs before the logs in the drawing-room; others were asleep on the chairs and settees (the carpet and rugs were not good enough for them), and he had to take incessant care in order to avoid treading on innumerable puppies.

Happily for her father's peace of mind, a telegram awaited Beatrice telling her she had won three firsts at Dublin with Canterbury Barbara. Quillian forthwith learned that dog-showing was perfectly straight; that Challis was the most upright of judges; and that he (Quillian) could not find a better hobby than breeding and exhibiting dogs; moreover, she nearly always spoke civilly to her father.

There were the sick dogs to be dosed and attended to before dinner, and the meals of the others to be given; although Miss Philbrick retained the services of two smart kennel-maids, she supervised everything herself; as a mark of peculiar favour, Quillian was permitted to assist.

He had not been long in the house before he noticed something that amused him not a little; for all that the dogs had the run of the place and did pretty much as they pleased, there were certain things they must not do; fighting and scratching were strictly forbidden; neither were they allowed to repose on certain settees which were covered with priceless tapestry.

Should their mistress be about, their conduct was exemplary, since they full well knew that, if they strayed from the path marked out for them, they would be sternly chastised: if she were out of the room and her father were there, however, they forgot their good manners, and squabbled to their hearts' content and went where they wanted, for all the reproof he might urge.

"It's no use," he admitted to Quillian on one of these occasions. "They know I'm too soft-hearted to hit 'em, and so they sort of see me coming."

But the sound of their mistress's step or voice recalled them to a sense of the proprieties; and in spite of, or because of, the discipline she exacted, one and all loved her devotedly, and were quite pathetic in their demonstrations of affection.

The dinner was more than once interrupted by Miss Philbrick getting up to see to a sick dog which, wrapped in flannel, was lying before the fire; afterwards, her latent good humour was temporarily dissipated because her father had forgotten a certain dog's pedigree.

She was telling Quillian, who did his best to appear

interested, how she nearly won a championship for one of her Poms. at Crufts, and had had victory snatched from her grasp by the judges' partiality for a dog named Topsy Turvey.

"Who bred Topsy Turvey?" she asked of her father, who looked uncomfortably perplexed.

"Don't you know?" she cried sharply.

"I'm afraid I don't at the moment, dear."

"Nor at any other time."

She addressed herself to Quillian, and said:

"That's the worst of father: he can never remember anything useful. We shall be in town for the Westminster Show—of course, you'll be there—and I really think I'll take the opportunity of having his memory trained."

Upon the two men being left to themselves, Sir Percy lost the nervousness he betrayed in his masterful daughter's presence; moreover, he respected Quillian for the way he took his wine (a nice discrimination in such matters had been cultivated on Feast Days at the monastery at Ypres), and his host's simple heart warmed to his new-made friend.

"Delighted to meet you, Quillian: it was a stroke of luck running against you to-day; and I hope we shall see a lot of you when you finally settle here."

Quillian gravely expressed his thanks.

"After the life of learning and all that sort of thing you've led, it will be very good of you to put up with old buffers like some of us."

"I shall greatly esteem the honour of your friendship," returned Quillian.

"Of course, there's old Vancourt: he's really a scholar and all that; but goodness knows how long the old fellow will last. And after all said and done, we're not wanting in young society."

"The Lownes, for instance."

"How did you like 'em?"

"I liked Joan."

"Nice girl, Joan: a bit peculiar, though."

"In what way?" asked Quillian, who was hoping to learn more of Mercia.

"Seems to prefer animals to human beings: likes to be

alone with horses, dogs, pet rabbits, and turkeys, goodness knows what. She actually told me once she would like to tame tigers and lions."

"Indeed!"

"If the place were her own, I believe she'd turn it into a menagerie."

"But—and then there's the eldest Miss Lownes," hazarded Quillian.

"Mercia. I've an idea you'll be attracted by Mercia."

"Everyone who mentions her seems to think highly of her."

"Mercia Lownes is too good for this world," declared Sir Percy.

"I'm looking forward to meeting her."

"You won't have to wait very long," smiled the elder; and, in response to a look of inquiry in Quillian's glance, he went on:

"As you can understand, there's been a lot of talk about you."

"I'm afraid I don't understand," replied Quillian in all sincerity.

"What! Young; and rich; and a bachelor! And then there's the past life you've led. All the girls are naturally more than interested."

Following upon further expressions of goodwill on the part of his host, Quillian mentioned his acquaintance with May Fothergill, and added that he thought of asking some of the women with whom he might be brought into contact if they would do something to assist her to a congenial situation in the event of her ultimately failing to find her aunt: rather to Quillian's surprise, Sir Percy's honest face fell.

"Is she young?" asked the latter after a silence.

"I should say seventeen or eighteen."

"Pretty?"

"Very; and graceful."

"Think she's—she's straight?"

"I should not have taken her in if I did not believe her to be honest."

"H'm!"

"You don't approve of what I've done!"

"That's all right. It's the women I'm thinking of."

"In what way?"

"I don't profess to know much about 'em—only a man who is a fool does that sort of thing—but they won't at all like being asked to help a 'flapper' of whom they know nothing. Their sympathies don't run that way."

"Are they so selfish? Surely not!"

"That I won't take on myself to say. But they've got their own interests to consider."

"You have surprised me."

"I dare say even the best of 'em will give you a few more surprises before you've quite done with 'em," laughed Sir Percy.

"But Mercia Lownes! Would she be like that?"

The man addressed considered, before replying:

"There's no knowing, you know."

"You have given me quite a shock."

"About Mercia?"

"About women generally. I never so much as dreamed they could be like that."

"I dare say I'm wrong, Quillian. Old fellers do get prejudiced, they say, when the girls won't look at 'em. But I will say this about Mercia!"

Quillian was all attention.

"She never contradicted her father," declared Sir Percy gravely.

Quillian enjoyed the drive home in the sweetness of the summer night; his heart warmed to his new friends, and his imagination was aglow at the probability of meeting the Mercia whose praises everyone sang.

A vision of St. Teresa in the chapel in Ypres came into his mind; he wondered if Mercia at all resembled her: a procession of scents from pasture and hedgerow assailed his nostrils, and these were responsible for his conjuring up many romantic pictures in which, should she prove to be the desire of his heart, he would do good deeds in order to prove his worth.

Then, and not till then, could he presume to take with both hands the gifts Providence had put within his reach; and could reconcile it to his conscience to settle down in his

beautiful home and enjoy the friendship of his kindly neighbours.

His house looked strangely venerable in the light of a young moon; he did not at once go to bed, and wandered about its many rooms until he came to one of which the housekeeper had made mention, but which he had scarcely entered; it was the state bridal chamber.

To-night he went in, and looked almost fearfully about him.

The dim light just permitted him to discern the great carved four-post bed in the middle of the room, while the rest of the cumbrous furniture was barely outlined; he went to one of the tall windows, and drew the curtains; on perceiving the moonlight haunting the forecourt and the sunken gardens beyond, he opened the window and looked out into the night.

His senses were bewitched by the odour of the flowers which, as if pining for appreciation, threw up their many perfumes in his face; a stream that fed the lake made murmuring music in his ears; some poplars were bending to each other as if they had much to say about their raiment; while away on his left a group of elms took on the semblance of a knot of discreet women who were spreading their skirts in order to conceal some romantic mystery.

Quillian's thoughts inclined to love; once more he marvelled where the one he would make his own was now sleeping.

But only for a very little while did he surrender to the intoxication of the spirit of the night.

In an access of gratitude for the glory of the world, and the opportunities that were his, he fell on his knees by the window, and after giving thanks for the manifold mercies which had been vouchsafed to him, he asked, fervently, that he might be rightly guided in the choice of a mate, so that he might win the fairest crown which earthly life could offer.

Last of all, he beseeched blessings on the head of whomsoever she might prove to be.

CHAPTER VIII

MERCIA LOWNES

‘WILL kind-hearted lady and gentleman who know what sorrow is send a contribution to the Princess Royal Hospital, Fulham Road, London, S.W.? Supported entirely by voluntary contributions, and in dire need of assistance.—REGINALD STONE HEMMINGAY, *Secretary*.’

Quillian read the above in the *Morning Post*, and something familiar in the appeal made him look through the pile of correspondence at his elbow—correspondence which mostly consisted of begging letters in all their infinite variety.

He had spoken to such a few people, and had so kept himself to himself, that he could not understand how the fact of his being possessed of means had leaked out; but there was no denying that every day brought an increased delivery of letters which nearly all asked for assistance on pleas that were transparently flimsy even to Quillian’s unsophisticated knowledge of the world’s devious ways.

He found the communication he sought. It confirmed his impression that he had received a letter from the same address. It was typewritten, and set out in excellent, if somewhat long-winded, English, the desperate case of the hospital from lack of funds for the barest necessities for the innumerable patients it constantly succoured. It was signed ‘Reginald Stone Hemmingay’ in a big, sprawling signature.

Quillian put it aside for further consideration, with some half-dozen others which seemed genuine on the face of them, and bent his mind to a more immediate matter.

Two days after he had seen the Philbricks, Mrs. Lownes had called, and had been accompanied by her second daughter, Maud.

Mrs. Lownes had been something of a surprise to him, as she was altogether different from what he had expected: she was small, slight, almost girlish-looking; was quite pretty, and had fine grey eyes, fringed with long, black lashes, which were nearly always cast down: she said little, leaving most of the talking to Maud, who was full of a barbarously bloodthirsty otter hunt she had recently enjoyed, and Quillian might almost have thought her a fool had he not perceived the width of her forehead, and had not her infrequent remarks been greatly to the point.

If the truth were told, Mrs. Lownes was a bitterly disappointed woman: she had started life with great expectations, and had married for love her boisterous, burly husband, and had all too soon discovered that she was mated to an irresponsible, impressionable boy.

At the time her children had been born (she had not looked forward to motherhood) he had made a great fuss over her, and this had done much to reconcile her to the temporary suspension of her ambitions, chief of which was to be a political force in the Conservative interest: almost directly after Joan had seen the light, he had become as clay in the hands of the potter with any woman who was clever enough to discover his foibles, and play at mothering him; these infatuations had resolved themselves into prolonged absences from the wife of his bosom, seemingly on fishing jaunts in Norway or Finland.

Three years back he had seen himself in the reproduction of a photographed house-party which had appeared in an illustrated journal; this had infected him with the prevailing passion for publicity at any price; it had got into his blood; and he had put himself to a lot of trouble in order that snapshots of his doings should find their way into periodicals that catered for this weakness in people who should have known better: it was the regret of his life that he had not won what he considered lasting fame by marrying a much-advertised star of the musical comedy firmament.

His wife had become cynical, embittered, and took a morbid pleasure in an affectation of self-effacement; although she made pretence of admiring her daughters,

at heart, she despised them, and most of all the saintly Mercia; she told herself that her remaining interest in life was to ascertain if any men would be fool enough to take them off her hands.

Quillian had been pressed to return the call before he went back to town, and had arranged to go over this afternoon.

He had thought much of all he had heard of Mercia: it seemed to him it was ordained that she could indeed be none other than the wife he was to seek: if this should be the case, he was devoutly thankful at so speedily accomplishing his purpose, and at escaping the feminine pitfalls into which one so inexperienced as he could easily be engulfed.

His excitement at what was toward was such that he ate a poor luncheon; feeling the need of correspondence between his emotional apprehensions and his physical processes, he resolved to walk the four miles separating him from his destination.

He greatly enjoyed the earlier part of this walk; the gay June sun rioted in the hedgerows, and kissed the 'ragged robbin' and 'cuckoo' flowers which bordered much of the way; it all seemed a meet environment for the romantic quest on which he had set out.

On nearing the abode of Mercia, however, he was conscious of a failing of spirit; of the fact that his heart was a-beat: he began to realize the tremendous issues, so far as his happiness was concerned, which waited on the consequences of his visit.

The Lownes lived at Derringstone Court, a large, not over-pleasing looking, red brick house, dating from the early seventeenth century; it was set in the middle of a park.

While Quillian waited for the door to be opened in response to his ring, he was sensible of a melodious throbbing which seemed to shake the building: there was something pleasantly reminiscent about this, and a few moments later it was evident that some one, doubtless Mercia, was playing an organ.

Upon the double doors being opened by a servant, he was met by a flood of melody; on entering the hall, he

perceived that the sound came from a room on the left.

He followed the man up the staircase, where he stopped to glance at a family tree, the members' portraits of which were painted in miniature on the branches (he had not time to look for a possible Mercia), to a drawing-room on the first floor; here, there was no one to receive him, and while he waited he looked about him with eager curiosity at the things that were part and parcel of Mercia's life.

The room was of noble dimensions, and was sparsely furnished with Louis Quatorze furniture, the gilt of which was almost dazzling in the sunlight: there was some tapestry and four or five fine oil-paintings on the walls; the spaces between these, and the infrequent settees and chairs, assisted the spacious dignity of the apartment.

The throbbing of the organ once more reached his ears; in order to hear what was being played, he went to, and just opened the door: it was a Mass of Mozart's, and one he knew well: as he listened to the stately periods, he had much ado to persuade himself that he was not occupying his stall in the monastery chapel at Ypres on the occasion of high festival.

This suggestion of the life he had left for ever disquieted his thoughts and set him slowly pacing the room: he had reached the further end, and had turned to reach the door, when a woman entered, and one he intuitively realized was Mercia: the organ went on playing.

She was very tall; her slight, almost too slight form, was crowned with fair hair, which lay about her head as might a halo: she had straight, regular features, and large blue eyes, and was clothed in black with the exception of a collar of lace about her neck.

And as she advanced with the sun shining on her hair, and turning it almost to burnished gold, it seemed to Quillian that she merely wanted a white robe and big downy wings to complete her resemblance to the Protestant conception of an angel.

She put out a fragile hand, and said in a voice that was thinner than he had expected:

"Mr. Quillian!"

He had some difficulty in replying:

"I know who you are!"

"Indeed!"

"I have already heard of you."

She dropped her eyes, and a slight smile touched her lips—a smile that for no reason that he could see gave him the ghost of a disappointment.

She continued smiling; and to break the silence, he said:

"I have been listening to the organ."

The smile widened.

"I was hoping—I believed it was you playing."

"Why?" she asked.

"Such music seemed to be part of you."

Mercia's smile became set, and there was a further silence.

"Do you play?" he asked presently.

She shook her head.

"You give all your time to good works!" he went on.

"There is so much to do, I wish I did. But I'm keeping you standing; please sit down."

He waited for her to set the example; after he was seated, she said:

"I do not know if you will see mother."

"I am sorry," declared Quillian.

"Mother has such funny ideas sometimes. She says"—the girl slightly emphasized the second word—"she always fears to bore people."

"I cannot imagine your mother doing any such thing."

"And that to bore people is the unforgivable sin."

Quillian smiled, and the girl glanced at him in some surprise.

"And how are your sisters?"

"Maud is about somewhere; she will be here directly. As for Joan, one never knows what she'll be doing for two minutes together."

"May I ask who it was who was playing?"

"Joan."

"Joan!"

"Sometimes she spends nearly all her time at the organ for days together; and then she won't touch it for weeks."

"But she plays so well."

"I believe she does," said Mercia, with no remarkable conviction. "Father Akhurst is always asking her to play the organ at chapel, but he hasn't persuaded her so far."

While they talked commonplace, Quillian marvelled why it was that the impression Mercia had made upon him on entering the room had lost some of its vividness: he had told himself she must indeed be the mate he sought on meeting her; and now this first fine frenzy, which he had taken to be love at first sight, had appreciably lessened, and its place was taken by an approach to a critical detachment.

This last was begotten of an analytic habit of mind he had cultivated in some measure at the monastery, and more particularly of late: not content with confining itself to his historical studies, it had a disconcerting knack of applying to those he met with in his daily round.

Now, and in spite of himself, this was taken up with Mercia; he was aware, and was not a little ashamed of himself at the realization, that she was not so appealing as he had believed: her hair was lacking in warmth; her eyes were round; her teeth were not very good; and she was not in her first youth.

He resolutely put away such unworthy reflections; and told himself that any comeliness she may have lost was because she had spent herself in good works: he stoutly held to this, but it did not stop him from having a dim understanding that if he were deeply in love, he would never admit a doubt of the loved one's perfections.

And as if to atone for his sorry thoughts, he said:

"I have been looking forward to seeing you."

"Indeed!" she returned.

"I have heard so much about you."

"Have you!"

"I understand you give your life to helping the helpless."

"One must do what one can."

"Unfortunately very few think like that. It is women such as you that atone for the indifference of the rest."

Mercia was silent; although Quillian strove valiantly, he found conversation difficult; he tried to draw her

out regarding her many activities and only succeeded in getting nebulous generalities; he offered to assist her charitable works; beyond thanking him, she did not give him any suggestions of how he could help; he made further efforts to come to grips with her personality, and was invariably repulsed by an indefiniteness of outline which he could only put down to the fact of her living her life on a plane wholly removed from, and one that was much above, his.

This elusiveness did something towards rekindling the ardour that had been prone to languish: it stimulated the elemental instinct of pursuit in the male.

This comparative fervour was qualified at realizing it was largely made up of her atmosphere of other-worldliness; with his passion for self-effacement, he told himself it was well this was so, since the love of such a woman as she was more meet for one who sought to tread the narrow way than an affection that was adulterated with everyday human attributes.

He was a little annoyed with himself at knowing a slight relief upon the entrance of Mrs. Lownes; she came into the room with an elderly, sweet-faced, white-haired woman, who was introduced to Quillian as Miss Eversley.

"How lucky I was to catch sight of you in the hall; otherwise I don't believe I should have seen anything of you," said Miss Eversley to Mrs. Lownes.

"I should always see you," returned Mrs. Lownes, in her quiet voice.

"But hearing about what you call my inevitable failures bores you."

"Not at all, dear. I love to breathe your atmosphere of altruism; it brings home to me my worldliness."

It appeared that Miss Eversley, a sensible, kindhearted woman, devoted much of her time, and a lot of her money, to taking an intelligent interest in a mean street of families in London; she was ever meeting with heart-breaking disappointment, but did not give up the plough to which she had put her hand, in the remote hope that the good seed she had sown might some day make some show of sprouting.

This afternoon, she related how she had got a starving plumber a permanent job with a borough council in a country town; and how, three days after, she had found him smoking his pipe in his London tenement because there was not the distraction of a music-hall in the place where he had found work.

"Poor fellow!" commented Mrs. Lownes.

"My dear!"

"It's very human."

"Still——"

"And he knows he's always you to fall back upon."

The coming of Maud, whose loud voice seemed in the nature of an outrage on the reposeful dignity of the room, was followed by tea; a few minutes later, Joan made a furtive appearance; she seemed bent on avoiding the others, and not infrequently regarded Quillian with appraising eyes.

While Maud talked chiefly about herself to Miss Eversley, Quillian was taken charge of by Mrs. Lownes.

"Well——!" she said in her subdued voice, and with her eyes persistently cast down.

He did not at all understand her, but directly she spoke, he was aware of a common sympathy between them; this, in spite of the fact that her exclamation was in the nature of a challenge.

Unconsciously catching her manner, he replied:

"Well——!"

"Are you any farther with life?"

"In what way?"

"Disappointed or otherwise?"

"Certainly not disappointed," he replied, and involuntarily glanced at Mercia, who was raptly gazing at the window: her mother followed the direction of his look, and merely said:

"Oh!"

There was a suspicion of contempt in this ejaculation, and he went on:

"How could I be otherwise when everyone is so kind to me!"

"Who?"

"Everyone I have met."

"What did you expect them to be?"

"I was surprised at receiving such kindness," he said simply.

"Are you humble, then?" she asked, and with an inflection of surprise in her voice.

"How do you mean?"

"Don't you think a lot of yourself?"

"How could I?" he returned as before.

"Millions do who haven't an atom of your excuses for vanity."

Incredulity and protest struggled in his mind; for want of words (he had again been glancing at Mercia) he made a gesture of demur.

"Anyhow, it will be interesting," she said.

"What will be interesting?"

"You."

"How?"

"To see what happens."

"You are not the first who has said that."

"I suppose all intelligent people are curious."

"But——"

"Yes," she said, upon his hesitating.

"What I do not, cannot, understand is that with some of those I have met, there seems a weariness—perhaps not weariness, but a distaste for life. A good and wise man where I came from said it was a well-known sickness of the soul. But whatever it is, it appears to afflict those who, on the face of it, should be the last to have it."

"Can you wonder?" she quickly returned in her quiet voice.

"Yes."

"That is because life is all new to you."

"I know there are pitfalls, and snares, and disappointments."

"Particularly disappointments."

"But that—surely that—gives zest to the struggle."

She raised her fine grey eyes, and looked at him for a moment with an immense curiosity before she dropped them, and said:

"One thinks so when one is very—very young."

Quillian laughed lightly and incredulously.

"Mentally, I mean. But some of us so soon grow old—I mean mentally."

"But people like yourself—mothers I mean—I read the other day, they renew their youth in their children."

"Something of the sort is often said," she remarked listlessly.

"But surely in your case," he continued, and once more he glanced at her eldest daughter, "there is justification for that."

"What do you think of her?" she asked in an undertone.

"Who?"

"You know well enough whom I mean: Mercia."

"No one could help admiring her."

"So I'm constantly told," she said, and still without any enthusiasm in her quiet, level voice.

"And—and——"

"Well——!"

"I hope I shall see very much more of her."

"I hope you will."

"Thank you."

"But my reason for wishing you to see more of her is not the reason you may think I have in my mind."

"Indeed!"

"I am always very curious to know what anyone I'm at all interested in thinks of Mercia; not at once, but when they get to know her: I judge of them by that."

"But what is there to know beyond that——"

"I judge of them by that," she interrupted.

Quillian had no further opportunity of talking to one he considered an enigmatical woman, for Mrs. Lownes turned to Miss Eversley and, seeing Mercia was by herself, he went over to her.

"I have been talking to your mother," he said.

Mercia smiled.

"She was very kind indeed, and gave me permission to come again often."

"You are only here for a short time."

"I very much hope I shall see you at least once before I go."

"Are you going for long?"

"That depends on many things."

"Indeed!"

He would have liked her to have betrayed some interest in his plans; instead, she smiled as before.

Once more he found conversation hard; and since Joan had disappeared, and Maud was fidgeting any and everywhere about the room, Quillian could not help hearing snatches of Mrs. Lownes's and Miss Eversley's talk.

The latter was upbraiding her friend for not getting more out of life. Upon Miss Eversley calling attention to her (Mrs. Lownes) daughters in turn, and as a means to this end, Mrs. Lownes interjected expressions that were meant to sum up her opinion of them. Upon Maud being referred to, her mother remarked, "Wintersports." A little later, "Tomboy" was applied to Joan; and Quillian waited in some suspense to hear what Mrs. Lownes might say of Mercia.

Upon Miss Eversley urging, "What of Mercia, then?" the latter's mother retorted:

"Ministering Children!"

"My dear!"

"Well, then, the 'Fairchild Family'!"

Quillian was taken aback by this woman who could judge her children with cold-blooded detachment: and as he regarded her slight, comely figure, her sad grey eyes, he marvelled what had given these last their expression.

The something he had already found enigmatical attracted him; he could not think she had known great trouble since this mother of big daughters still looked youthful.

There was no denying the ability betrayed by the width and depth of the white forehead; neither was there any gainsaying the capacity revealed by her eyes on the rare occasions she permitted them to be seen.

Once more what he considered his uncanny facility of observation and comparison got the better of him; he found himself thinking what a rare gift to a man would be the love of such a woman.

For all her make-believe of unassertive insignificance,

she had a vast sympathy, humour, understanding, and tenderness, which would be lavished on one who could kindle the embers of her emotion into flame: he had been told there was a husband somewhere in the background; he wondered what manner of man he could be since he did not appear to value the treasure that was his.

He could not, and did not, seek to hide from himself that she was a creature of stronger clay, and of a more subtle mind, than the saintly Mercia: perhaps, because such a woman could easily sweep a man from off his feet and into the depths of life, his leanings swiftly inclined to the far safer personality of her eldest daughter who, just now, made much of her original appeal.

On finding himself again with Mrs. Lownes, he resolved to ask her advice, if not her assistance, with regard to Miss Fothergill.

Directly he had an opportunity, he told her the whole story, and of how deeply he felt his responsibility with regard to the young woman.

After he had done, Mrs. Lownes glanced at him for the fraction of a second with her capable eyes, and said:

"She is young?"

"Quite."

"And pretty?"

"Very."

"And charming?"

"I should say she could be."

"And you have every reason to think she was speaking the truth?"

"Every reason."

The ghost of a smile touched her lips; this, Quillian did not see.

"Yes, I might certainly do something to help her if I thought she'd work."

"What do you mean?" asked Quillian quickly.

"What I say: if I thought she'd work."

"But——"

"That we shall see if the necessity arises."

"You are very kind," he told her; "but it is only what I should have expected."

"Your appreciation is thrown away," she said in her level voice.

"How so?"

"Apart from assisting you, I should be acting more from my morbid curiosity than anything else."

"Indeed!"

"To see if you had been taken in; and to see how it all turns out."

" 'Taken in'!"

"I believe men, particularly good men, have been deceived once or twice by women since the world began."

Before he could say anything she went on:

"Very few women would help a young and pretty girl for reasons you would never understand. To begin with, she is very young, you say—the unforgivable sin in the eyes of most of us—but apart from all that, a pretty girl is a nuisance in a house for more reasons than one."

"I'm surprising you?" she asked, upon his remaining silent.

"In some respects."

"In any case, helping the helpless and all that sort of thing is rather out of my line. It doesn't come naturally to me, as it does to some people. One saint in a family is more than enough."

"Although you tell me, I can scarcely believe it."

"I leave all that sort of thing to Mercia. She leavens my natural selfishness."

Quillian glanced at Mercia, who was lost in thought, and with her characteristic fixed smile on her lips.

"Why don't you ask her?" continued her mother.

"Mercia!"

"Why not?"

"I should like to have done so, but after your mentioning the reluctance of some women—"

"Surely that does not apply to Mercia!" she interrupted.

"I should have remembered that," he assented.

"Ask her by all means, if you care to."

"You have no objection?"

"I want you to."

"Thank you."

"It will be a test of her character," she murmured.

Quillian pondered the other's last words so far as he was able; although he could not fathom Mrs. Lownes' mind, he more than suspected the remark was in the nature of a reflection upon Mercia.

Quillian was pressed to stay for dinner, but since he wanted to be alone with his thoughts, more particularly to appraise the significance of the undoubted impression Mercia had made upon him, he refused; before he took his leave, however, he had word with her regarding the matter he had spoken of with her mother.

They had left the drawing-room, and were strolling in the gardens; it was here that, on finding himself alone with Mercia, he broached the subject.

She did not seem to give him any particular attention, a thing that discouraged him, and made him think that perhaps, after all, her mother had spoken truly, and that her sex were indisposed to assist one of the less fortunate among themselves who was young and pretty.

She was silent after he had done, and he said:

"Well!"

Mercia turned her round blue eyes upon him; a rapt expression came into her face.

"I will do all I can," she said.

"You will!"

"I will do my very best."

"How good of you!" he cried. "I might have known."

"It is my duty."

Partly because he had momentarily misjudged her; chiefly on account of her angelic thought for another, his second impressions of her appearance were forgotten.

He was very near to adoring her on the spot.

CHAPTER IX

AN UNDERSTANDING

QUILLIAN sat at dinner at Mrs. Lownes' on the evening of his departure for town; amongst others who had been bidden was Lady Ashford; he had taken her down, and she sat on his right.

The wife of Lord Vaucourt's heir was a little woman with uncertain coloured hair and green eyes: she was badly made up and, as if despairing of her handiwork at the last moment, had smothered her face with powder.

Her handsome, stalwart husband, who was on the farther side of the table, was seated beside Mercia, at whom Quillian repeatedly glanced.

If it had been at all possible, he would have got out of this festivity, but his hostess had wished him to be present, and there was no denying her: he would have preferred a quiet evening with Mrs. Lownes and Mercia.

Since Quillian had met the latter, she had been rarely if ever out of his thoughts; he had been striving to make up his mind as to whether or no she was the desire of his heart.

Away from her, he was ever so convinced he loved her; should he be with her, however (one way and another he had seen a good deal of Mercia since his first call), there was a declension in his regard; on such occasions, he often found himself wondering if his affection were merely compounded of respect and admiration for her praiseworthy qualities.

He was hard put to it to reconcile these two phases of mind, and could only account for the lessening of what he called 'love' in her company by ascribing it to an innate sense of his unworthiness to aspire to such a pearl above price.

In spite of being loth to tear himself away, he was eager to return to town in order to commence the good fight which would enable him to approach her with an even mind.

And in order to provide an inspiration for the struggle that lay ahead, he had resolved, should opportunity offer, to come to some sort of an understanding with her before he went away.

He was not a bit interested in Lady Ashford, or in the conversation of the table, which was chiefly of local interests unless Miss Philbrick, who was there with her father, diverted it to the subject of dogs.

The serious bent of his mind was at issue with the commonplace atmosphere which surrounded him, and he not infrequently obtained a welcome sense of relief by meeting the eye of his hostess, who in her subtle, whimsical way seemed completely to understand his doubts and desires.

Lady Ashford had called on him almost directly after his first meeting with Mrs. Lownes; on his returning the visit, he had been struck by certain aspects of her father-in-law's home which stood for the respective temperaments of her husband and herself.

Lord Ashford was a keen sportsman; mounted heads of big game, and many fox masks and brushes upon the walls, were evidences of his prowess.

His wife inclined to the stage; she was responsible for the many photographs of theatrical celebrities which littered the place; she could talk of little else beyond current gossip about actors and actresses, and was ever so disappointed with Quillian at his failing to share her appreciation of such people: if he had known someone who knew a second-rate actor, she would have taken him to her heart.

There was also an elderly relative, a queer old woman, dressed in rusty black, who said little, and who, in spite of the warmth of the day, crouched beside a blazing fire, and warmed a woollen cap and mittens.

She had had a few words with Quillian, and had mysteriously alluded to handy methods of suicide; she was not present this evening.

Ashford had tried him with sport; and his wife, who had long since got over her infatuation for her handsome, not over quickwitted husband, with the stage, until Quillian had despaired of making his visit a success.

Then Father Akhurst had called, and it was owing to him that, as a special mark of favour, he had been introduced to Lord Vaucourt, who led the life of a recluse, and rarely saw the members of his family who, by his desire, lived under the same roof.

Vaucourt occupied three or four rooms in a remote wing of the house; on being conducted to him along endless passages and staircases, Quillian found him to be very old, and very shrivelled, and seeming to be little beyond noble forehead, piercing dark eyes, and beautiful white hands.

He had taken to Quillian, and on signifying to Father Akhurst that he wished to be alone with the new-comer, had asked him much regarding the Franciscan Order, and the friary at Ypres.

Then he had questioned Quillian about his intentions, and had strongly urged his doing his utmost for the honour and glory of the Church.

Several times Quillian had believed he had been trespassing too long on the venerable old man's time and had made as if to go; to be prevented by Vaucourt, who had said it was a refreshing experience to meet with someone of a serious turn of mind.

Finally, he had not a little surprised Quillian by almost fiercely upbraiding the younger generation for the lack of purpose and seriousness which he declared it exhibited on every hand.

He had deplored in burning words the decay of religious belief; the growth of rationalism; the passion for eating, drinking, and making merry, without taking thought for the morrow: also, the pitiful absence of patriotism, all alarming symptoms of national decadence.

He had ended by saying:

"I am a man of peace, and have given my long life to good works so far as it has lain in my power. But I have thought much of the things I have been telling you;

and I have come to the conclusion that the only thing that can save this country is to be involved in a war for its very existence. This trying by fire is the only means that I can see for its regeneration. It's the supreme—the ultimate test, and God in His infinite wisdom has willed it so to be.”

On returning to the drawing-room, Quillian had found that Mr., Mrs., and Miss Wenborn had called (they were here to-night), and he had regarded them, and particularly the last, with some curiosity, since Father Akhurst had spoken of her as a possible bride.

Mrs. Wenborn had seemed possessed of a desire to look as much as possible like a nun; she had worn a plain black dress unrelieved of ornament with the exception of a big silver crucifix which hung about her neck.

Her husband, after the manner of many sincere converts to Roman Catholicism, was far more bigoted than the average run of his faith; he was a tall, stolid, morose man, and quite believed that it was only the existence of convents and monasteries which prevented the wrath of God from consuming the dwellers in cities as a punishment for their misdeeds.

Miss Wenborn did not appeal to Quillian at all; she was tall and awkward; and had unpleasant green eyes in a pasty face: of seemingly set purpose, she had sat rather apart from the others, and if spoken to appeared to be startled from rapt meditation.

The effect she had on Quillian was to fix Mercia the more firmly in his mind.

To-night, he noticed Mercia ate next to nothing; she seemed more than commonly preoccupied; twice, on catching his eye, her gaze faltered, and the blood came into her face.

The second time she showed this embarrassment, Lady Ashford said:

“ So you are really going to town to-morrow ! ”

“ Yes,” returned Quillian.

“ There is no chance of your changing your mind ? ”

“ I think not.”

“ How lucky—how very lucky you are ! ”

“ Indeed ! ”

"I understand you know nothing at all of the stage?"

"Nothing at all."

"And you have it all before you to find out!"

Quillian smiled.

"I was like that once," she went on. "But then I didn't know what charmin' people actors and actresses were."

"I hear they're rather egotistical."

"Isn't it delightful of them?"

"Delightful?"

"If one's anxious to know everythin' one can of such wonderful people, and all about the splendid things they've done in their lives, it's more than good of them to reveal their personalities."

"If they and you are satisfied, there's no more to be said," remarked Quillian.

A little later, she said:

"Tommy's goin' up to town to-morrow."

"So I understand."

"He's goin' up by the two: it's the best train in the day; so I dare say you will catch that."

"Very likely."

"I'll tell him to look out for you," she said, and added in an undertone: "If you really want to know some really delightful theatrical people, Tommy can introduce you."

"I'll bear it in mind if I do."

"They are so sweet to him. They're always ready to throw up all sorts of things to lunch and dine with him. If it weren't for Jack and his father, I'd have the house full of them."

"Doesn't your husband care for them?"

"Jack!" she exclaimed contemptuously, and glanced at the wind-tanned face of her husband. "He can talk of nothin' else but huntin' and shootin'; and that's one of the reasons I'm so fond of actors."

"Ever heard Tommy sing?" she asked presently.

"Not yet," returned Quillian.

"A born comedian, if ever there were one."

"Indeed!"

"He's really wonderful. I'm ever so proud of him;

and to think of all that fine talent being wasted is too dreadful for words."

"Why doesn't he take it up?"

"Professionally?"

"Well—yes."

"His father wouldn't hear of it."

"I suppose not," assented Quillian, who could well believe that scholarly Lord Vaucourt would offer the strongest objections to a scion of his house clowning upon the boards of a playhouse.

Quillian was, perhaps, more pleased than otherwise at the withdrawal of the women; and though, for the time being, he lost sight of Mercia and could no longer exchange understanding glances with her mother, he was spared Lady Ashford's theatrical talk.

Quillian would have liked a chat with Sir Percy Philbrick, for whom he had a liking, but was prevented by Father Akhurst, who came over and sat beside him.

"I shall not see you before you go," said the priest.

"Not!"

"I had intended coming over to-morrow, but I have a funeral, and many cases of sickness."

"I am sorry," said Quillian, with no particular conviction.

"You will at once see Father Horan at Wapping!"

"Directly I return, if he is back."

"He is probably there now. And I should like to hear from you as often as you can find time to write."

There was more than a suspicion of a command in this remark—a command that Quillian secretly resented, perhaps, because he was not overmuch in sympathy with the hard-and-fast ecclesiasticism of the priest's mind.

Doubtless Father Akhurst perceived this antagonism, for he said:

"Father Timothy, your Guardian at Ypres, would prefer it."

"I shall certainly write to you," returned Quillian, and as civilly as he might.

"And that other matter. Have you yet made up your mind?"

"You mean——" hesitated Quillian.

"With regard to marriage," said the priest in an undertone. "Have you made up your mind about Mercia?"

"I have, and I have not."

"Undecided?"

"Yes."

"Doesn't she appeal to you sufficiently?"

Quillian glanced about him, and, perceiving that the other men (excepting Wenborn, who sat gloomily apart) were rather loudly discussing politics, he turned to the priest and communicated his doubts of his worthiness to seek such feminine perfection for his own.

"What are you going to do then?" asked the priest after he had done.

"I thought of explaining much of what I have told you to her mother, and of asking her if I have her permission to speak to Mercia with a view of getting some sort of an understanding."

"With the idea of ultimate matrimony?"

"Yes."

"Would it not be wiser to secure such a prize as she would be once and for all?"

"How do I know that she would be willing?"

"If she realized it were her duty——"

"Duty!" interrupted Quillian sharply.

The word jarred his romantic imaginings.

"Duty to herself: duty to the Church," continued the priest.

Quillian glanced at the cold eyes of Father Akhurst; just then they wore a calculating expression.

"In a matter of this nature I should very much prefer to leave duty out of it," said Quillian gravely.

"Please yourself," returned the other, and rather irritably: it did not occur to Quillian until some hours after that Father Akhurst had probably been urging much the same thing upon Mercia.

On going to the drawing-room, Quillian found himself by Mrs. Lownes; it was as though they were both eager for the other's company.

They talked commonplace should anyone be immediately within earshot; directly they could speak without fear of being overheard, their conversation became more intimate.

"You have enjoyed yourself this evening!" she said in her low voice, and with her eyes on the ground.

"Naturally," he returned.

"I knew you would be fascinated by Lady Ashford."

"I beg your pardon."

"You heard what I said."

"Still——"

"Admit you were fascinated."

"Nothing of the kind."

"Weren't you?"

"Not at all."

"Really?"

"I should not say what I did not think."

"I know you wouldn't," she said, and slightly emphasized the pronoun. "And I'm glad to hear it."

"Indeed!"

"I don't like her at all. One would think she was born and brought up in West Kensington."

Quillian, for want of something better to say, remarked:

"I thought you were such friends."

"I could never be friends with a woman who made up so badly."

Quillian was hard put to it to keep back a smile, and Mrs. Lownes said:

"How do you think Mercia is looking this evening?"

"As she always does: wonderful!" returned Quillian.

"Do you know what I should have said if anyone had asked me?"

"No!"

The reply came with more than a suspicion of contempt:

"As she always does: wonderful!"

Quillian glanced at Mercia, and saw that she was listening to Father Akhurst; her face wore its most rapt expression; her lips were parted in their characteristic smile.

He would have feasted his eyes on her in whole-hearted admiration, had he not been a little disconcerted by the bitterness underlying her mother's remark; he glanced at the latter, and, at the same moment, she raised her eyes to his, whereupon he was moved by their melancholy expression.

Neither of them spoke for a while, until he said:

" May I ask you something ?"

" What is it ?"

" It is almost an impertinence on such a slight acquaintance " (she again raised her eyes)—" on such short acquaintance; but are you happy ?"

" Who is ?" she returned quickly.

" I should have thought you would have been if anyone."

" Why ?"

" You have so much in life."

" Have I ?" she said indifferently.

" Haven't you ?"

" Most people would think so."

" Including myself."

Mrs. Lownes slowly shook her head.

" I don't mind your knowing," she said. " But I'm not: anything, anything but."

" I am sorry," he declared in all sincerity.

" I'm glad of that. Perhaps I expect—rather I should say expected—too much. Anyhow, the depressing fact remains."

" It's a grievous pity."

" Why ?" she asked sharply. " Why do you think it is ?"

" If I may say so, you seem on a different plane from most of the women I have met."

" Including Mercia ?"

" Mercia occupies a niche to herself, so to speak."

" A plaster saint."

Again Quillian was disturbed by her lack of enthusiasm where her daughter was concerned.

He was silent, and she said, and much as if she were eager to make their conversation entirely relevant to themselves:

" Perhaps I am too critical to have the average everyday happiness most people more or less have. I pull motives to pieces too much, and am cursed with a morbid habit of self-analysis which never leaves one alone."

" Is that so ?"

" It is so, unhappily. And yet, in spite of what brains I am blessed or cursed with, and the interest I may take

in things most women could not so much as understand, I will surprise you by telling you what in my inmost heart—and I have got a heart, although very, very few suspect it—I believe to be the only complete happiness, however transient it may be.”

“Tell me.”

“I will. And there’s not a soul alive—except one—to whom I would admit so much.”

“I am honoured.”

“You are, and I’m not by any means vain. Have you ever read Omar Khayyâm?”

“Who is he?”

“You have never heard of him?”

“No.”

“That’s refreshing. He was a Persian poet and philosopher, who lived ever so long ago. He wrote many wise and beautiful things; but they have been spoken and written about so much, they have almost become trite.”

“But if they are wise and beautiful——”

“I know what you would say—they would never become stale: I suppose it’s the depressing people who write and quote them. Anyway, the most familiar quatrain runs:

“‘Here with a Loaf of Bread beneath the Bough,
A Flask of Wine, a Book of Verse—and Thou
Beside me singing in the Wilderness—
And Wilderness is Paradise enow.’

I quote it to tell you that that sums up my conception of happiness.”

“Indeed!”

“‘Beside me singing in the wilderness,’ ” she repeated.

Quillian looked at the woman beside him—at her frail figure; her sweet fair hair; and the almost arrantly innocent expression of the face with its small, regular features—and even as he looked, he was aware, in spite of the lie her appearance might give to his conviction, that she was endowed with a wealth of tenderness and an infinite capacity for passion: he was, also, conscious that, for all the calmness of her voice and the placid expression of her face, she was unusually moved.

He was infected by the emotion that possessed her, but in his case it inclined his thoughts to Mercia: at the

same time, he was not blind to the fact that to mention her just then would be in the nature of offering a stupid violence to her mother's thoughts.

Perhaps she, with her woman's intuition, suspected what was toward in his mind or, with her natural humility, she believed she had said quite enough about herself; in order to divert the conversation, she remarked:

"And I suppose I am boring you to tears, since you would much rather talk about Mercia."

"It would be impossible for you to bore me," he returned simply.

"Do you mean that?" she asked; and before he could reply, she added: "I know you do, and I am glad you think so."

For all this suggestion of speaking of Mercia, she went off at a tangent, and talked of every other subject, until, fearing that, if he further delayed, he would not get another such opportunity, he said:

"I should like to speak of Mercia."

"Oh!" she exclaimed shortly.

"That is, if I may."

"I know what is in your mind."

"You do!"

"I am not blind. And——"

"Yes!" he said upon her pausing.

She involuntarily glanced at Father Akhurst, and went on:

"Other things have come to my knowledge. And I suppose you want to propose to her, is that it?"

"Not exactly."

"Indeed!" she asked with quickening interest.

Quillian told her in as few words as possible of his doubts respecting his worthiness of Mercia.

Mrs. Lownes listened with a disturbing ghost of a smile upon her lips; after he had done, she asked:

"Are you serious?" And again before he could reply, she added: "Of course you are. You, of all people, would not mention such a matter if you were not. But before you say any more, let me tell you this: You speak of your worthiness. I don't believe there's a woman in the world good enough to marry a really good man."

"Mrs. Lownes!"

"I mean it! When I say goodness, I don't mean namby-pamby, plaster-saint goodness. I mean a man who is good in spite of himself; for, after all said and done, the best man in the world is capable of being the worst."

"You astonish me more and more."

"I don't suppose I shall be the only woman who will do that," she remarked bitterly.

"You think so poorly of your sex!"

"I am a woman," she retorted. "But to 'return to our muttons.' About Mercia: so far as I'm at all interested, there's only one thing."

"And that?" he asked quickly.

"Will she make you happy?"

"Mercia!" he exclaimed, and wondered if he had heard aright.

"Mercia," she returned in her quiet, even voice.

"I cannot conceive of anyone expressing such a doubt, least——"

He stopped short, and she finished the sentence for him.

"Least of all her mother."

"I admit it was in my mind."

"Can you conceive of Mercia 'Beside me singing in the wilderness'?"

Quillian again glanced at the girl; it seemed to him that she, more than anyone else, demanded for her environment an awry civilization in which she must always be denying herself to put things right.

"Can you?" pursued her mother.

"It is the last thing I should expect of her," he returned coldly.

She perceived his resentment, and said:

"So far as I am concerned, say what you please to her. And if I may say so, I think she is very, very lucky."

For all his displeasure at Mrs. Lownes' implied criticism of her daughter, Quillian more than once, and in spite of himself, found himself picturing Mercia in the situation the elder woman had suggested, and could not deny its incongruity.

In order to still these disturbing fancies, he kept on telling himself that he and Mercia were the last people in

the world to want to lead such a lotus-eating existence; and that he could select no better life-long companion than she for the work that lay to his hand.

The opportunity he sought did not come so readily as he had hoped, for upon his repeatedly seeking to be with her, she was claimed by first one and then another of her mother's guests, until, at last, he despaired at his ill-fortune.

Several times he came in contact with Mrs. Lownes; once, upon her asking if he had yet spoken, and his telling her of his bad luck, she had replied:

"There's nothing to worry about; Providence always forgets to watch over those who want to get engaged."

But towards the end of the evening the fates relented; the chance he had waited for came readily enough.

The night was fine and warm, and some left the drawing-room and dispersed themselves about the hall and the great terrace without the front-door; the Honourable Thomas Chalfont, who had been itching to show of what comic stuff he was made, was about to sing, and Mercia, disliking such frivolous entertainment, had strolled downstairs with Father Akhurst.

Quillian, close upon this departure, had caught her mother's eye; he had made so bold as to follow her downstairs, and it had come about that directly the priest had seen him, he had left his charge; and Quillian, with heart abeat, had been quick to seize his opportunity.

This was in the hall; as if they were of one mind on the matter, they left the house and strolled out into the summer night.

From the drawing-room on the first floor came the noise of voices and laughter; a little later, Tommy Chalfont's voice, in a song from a popular musical comedy: almost at the same moment, the playing of the organ by Joan was borne to where they stood, and the sound of two instruments and the voice worried each other in his ears.

Quillian and Mercia moved farther away; wheresoever they went, they were pursued by jarring notes.

He listened in spite of himself, and the lilt of the song and the majestic throbbing of the organ seemed symbols of the conflicting purposes he had encountered in life:

on the one hand was light-hearted frivolity; on the other, solemn, elemental things which were the very woof of existence.

"Joan plays well," he remarked, for want of courage to make a beginning with the resolve he had in mind.

"You think so!"

"Don't you!"

"I—I suppose she does."

"And the first time I heard her, I was sure it must be you!"

There was a silence; he was seeking for fitting words with which to voice his heart when she slightly shivered and said:

"It is cold."

"Too cold to stay out a little longer?"

"I—I think so."

She would have moved towards the house had he not laid a detaining hand upon her arm; she stayed her steps, and by some subtle telepathy he was aware she was responsive to his mood.

He looked her hard in the face, and sought to catch and hold her eyes; but these were steadily averted from him, and looked wistfully over the expanse of gardens and park which were just discernible in a rising moon; her face wore its characteristic smile.

The influences of her sex, personality, and the young, star-gay night emboldened him, and gave rein to his tongue.

"Do you know why I want you to stay?" he began.

She did not reply; and her smile became more fixed.

"I will tell you," he went on; and with words that carried conviction, since they appeared to come from his heart, he told her how he believed she had been selected by an allwise Providence to be his mate; of how his heart clave to her; of his many certainties regarding his unfitness to win such a one; and of his daring to hope she would consent to be his should he prove meet for such a priceless treasure.

He had been carried away by the fervour of his words, and dared to expect a warm response.

All she said was:

"I will think over everything you have said."

"Is that all?" he cried impatiently.

"You do not let me finish. And I will try very, very hard to discover if what you suggest will be good for us both."

"Is—is that all?" he repeated.

"Is not that enough?"

He was all too painfully aware of how meagrely her words satisfied his heart-hunger; and was conscious of a sense of disconsolateness: a moment's reflection, however, told him that her remoteness from the clay of everyday humanity was a further proof, if one were needed, of her saintliness and, therefore, of her surpassing value.

"You had better come in," he said. "You are too precious to risk catching cold."

Again she did not speak; upon his glancing at her, he perceived she was once more gazing with her round blue eyes across the gardens and park, and with the smile that was seemingly inseparable from her upon her lips; in spite of himself, it flashed into his mind that she was looking almost plain.

Almost the first person he encountered after he had left Mercia was her mother.

"Any luck?" she asked, and without raising her eyes.

"The best of luck," he returned.

"I do so hope it will make for your happiness," she said, and permitting herself to betray warmth.

"I do not see how it could possibly do otherwise."

"If a bad man marries, it doesn't matter very much how it turns out; he's happy either way: but a good man hasn't his consolations."

He did not speak, and she added:

"I never thought Mercia would ever 'sing in the wilderness.'"

For the rest of the evening, and until he fell asleep, Quillian repeatedly told himself how dearly he loved Mercia, and that he was ever so happy and ever so fortunate: perhaps this was because his fancy kept on playing him tricks, and making him see pictures of himself in a romantic wilderness, where the woman who was singing out her heart to him had a disconcerting knack of changing from Mercia to her mother.

CHAPTER X

A FRIEND IN NEED

'THERE are two Wings by which a Man soars above the World—Sincerity and Purity. The former regards the Intention, the latter the Affections; That aspires and aims at a Likeness to God; This makes us really like Him. We should find no difficulty in any good Action, were but our Minds free from all intemperate Passion and Desire.'

"I say, old chap."

"Yes," from Quillian, who was striving to bring his thoughts to bear on the foregoing; this was no easy matter since Tommy Chalfont, who sat in the opposite corner of the railway carriage (they had met at the station), kept on interrupting him about anything or nothing.

Tommy handed an open illustrated weekly journal to Quillian, the page displaying a full length portrait of a musical comedy actress who, dressed as a dairy-maid (the letterpress said she had been brought up on a farm and loved the country), was represented as milking a cow on the wrong side; and said:

"There's a smart girl!"

Quillian, who from his habit of mind suffered bores gladly, took the journal, and replied non-committally:

"Is she?"

"I should just think she was. She comes of an awfully good family—for an actress. Her father is a sportin' publican, and I happen to know he's fixed her up with a pretty little flat in town."

"What for?"

"Eh? So she can marry a 'nut.'"

Quillian, who had his own views on the propriety of the

sporting publican's behaviour regarding his daughter, handed back the journal.

"What d'ye think of her?" asked Tommy.

"I was thinking the girl's father is allowing her to run grave risks."

"Those sort of things don't count with artistes, old sport."

"Indeed!"

"Free and easy: art for art's sake: go as you please, don't you know!"

Quillian resumed his reading of Chapter IV. of the 'Imitation.'

'And this Perfection of Freedom we should not fail to attain, did we, in all our Designs and Undertakings, propose no other Ends than Obedience to the Will of God, and promoting the Good of our Neighbour.

'Were but our Minds thus fixed, and our Intentions regulated, everything would strangely contribute to our Edification.'

"What ho!" cried Tommy.

Quillian lifted his eyes.

"Here's Bella St. Ives! Suppose you know all about her?"

"I've never heard of her."

"Not?"

"Not."

"I'm forgettin' where you've come from, so there's some excuse for you. She's awfully well known."

Quillian dropped his eyes on his book; the other went on:

"I'll tell you, as it's useful information in case you hear her talked about. Six months ago, or thereabouts, the sprinkler—used for puttin' out fires—went wrong while the show was on, and she was one of the girls that got some water on her neck. There was a lot of talk about it, and she was interviewed 'no end': made her a celebrity."

Quillian made a further effort to read.

'We should study the Volume of Nature with Profit, and every Line in that large Book would tend to our Instruction. The very smallest, and, in common Esteem, most despicable Creature would represent, as in a Glass, the Goodness of God to us.'

"I say!" from Tommy.

Quillian closed his book.

"Gladys Montmorency has got her chance at last."

"Who might she be?"

"She's just got promoted from the 'two two's——"

"The what?"

"The chorus, two guineas a week—two two's, see?—to a small part and understudy. Here's an interview with her."

"Is that usual or unusual?"

"It's usual enough if she can guarantee the sale of so many hundred copies of the *Giddy Globe*," said Tommy, who added rather self-consciously:

"I happen to know her."

"Oh!"

"Full of ambition, that girl: used to tell me how when she was on the stage, she felt so chock full of genius, and all that sort of thing, that she always felt she was goin' to soar off the earth."

"Indeed!"

"And did it all on ginger-beer: never looked at anythin' stronger."

"That's to her credit."

"I know. Anythin' stronger used to bring her out in spots," declared Tommy ingenuously.

Upon Quillian remaining silent, the other went on:

"Now we're up in town together, I'll show you round if you like."

"Thanks, but I don't think I'll trouble you."

"No trouble—a pleasure, if not a duty."

"Duty!"

"Does a man good to see a bit of Life?"

"I dare say I shall see enough before I have done."

"Still, if a fellow's goin' to get married, he ought——"

"Who is going to be married?"

"Ain't you? Thought it was all fixed up with you and Mercia."

Quillian was disposed to resent this intrusion into things of the spirit, but it was impossible to be annoyed with one who was so transparently honest as Tommy Chalfont.

"Nothing is definitely settled."

"Sorry; thought it was. She isn't to my taste, but she's awfully good and pi., and all the rest of it. Don't think I want to lead you from the narrow way and all that sort of thing. But comin' from where you do, and thrown clean on the world, the more one knows what's what the better."

"We are none of us so helplessly innocent as you think," said Quillian, with a grave smile.

"Glad to hear it. One can't know too much in London; and that is where I thought I'd come in useful."

"Father Timothy, the Superior of my monastery, was very worldly wise. He had a theory that every beautiful woman had seven devils in her heart."

"He wasn't wrong about a good many of 'em."

"Is that your experience?"

"Still, it don't apply to actresses."

"Doesn't it?"

"Not a bit. And that's where I felt quite safe in givin' you one or two introductions."

"I should have thought they were subject to many temptations that the everyday woman doesn't get."

"Don't you b'lieve it, old pal. Take my case, f'r instance. Hope I shan't shock you but, although I ain't a saint or a sinner, an' no worse than anyone else, I've knocked about a lot, and know what I'm talkin' about," said Tommy, before pausing for breath, and impressively continuing: "I've taken out lots of girls from the Frivolity and spent tons of money on 'em. Straight! Straight isn't in it! Unless you've a weddin' ring in your pocket, and mean to do the right thing, there's always a dear old 'mar' who pops up at critical moments, and sees her daughter through."

Quillian smiled in spite of himself.

"I say, we're gettin' near town. Where do you hang out?"

Quillian told him.

"I go to the Grosvenor, so we shan't be far away from each other. What are you doin' to-night?"

"I've several things to see to," returned Quillian, who reflected that he was faced by the problem of May

Fothergill, since this young woman had not yet succeeded in discovering her aunt.

"Let's go out somewhere to feed."

"I don't think I will to-night, thank you."

"And we could wind up at the Albert Hall if there's anythin' on. I'm always willin' to drop in to anyone else's line."

Before Quillian could refuse the offered dissipation, Tommy said:

"Forgot though. Bobbie Wiltshire is puttin' up at the Grosvenor to-night. I'm fixed up with him."

"Then my staying at home won't inconvenience you?"

"Not a bit. Would otherwise though, as I'm one of those fellows who hate bein' alone."

Quillian could well believe it, and said:

"Perhaps I shall see something of you before you go back."

"Course you will," said Tommy, and, as if surprised at such a tentative suggestion. "I hope you'll always be lookin' me up."

"It's very kind of you."

"Any advice; any hole you get into; you sprint along to me. I'm the man to see you through."

"I won't fail to."

"And whatever anyone may think, no one can ever say I've 'been had for a mug.'"

Quillian turned over in his mind whether or no he should tell Tommy Chalfont his dilemma regarding Miss Fothergill; he decided to say nothing until after he had got back and seen for himself if she would accept work Mrs. Lownes might secure for her.

They arrived at the London terminus, where the two men occupied the same taxi-cab as they were both going in the same direction.

Tommy let down the window, and took deep breaths of the London air.

"Does me good to breathe it again," he remarked.

"Sort of tonic after vegetatin' in the country for so long."

"Why don't you live in London altogether?" returned Quillian.

"I'd love to. But it's father. He's an awful old autocrat in his way. Seems to think I'd do somethin' foolish in town."

"Indeed!"

"Just imagine it! My comin' a cropper! There's no wider feller goin', as I dare say you've twigged for yourself."

The cab stopped at the Grosvenor, and Tommy got out; he did not leave Quillian until the latter had promised to look him up on the earliest opportunity.

The nearer Quillian got to his flat, the more his misgivings concerning May Fothergill increased; his horizons had considerably widened during his short stay in Kent; and for all his desire to assist the girl, either to find her relations, or to earn her living respectably, his newborn affection for the peerless Mercia made him careful of doing anything that might assist the undoing of his future happiness.

He had heard nothing from Grumby for three or four days, and could only hope that nothing untoward had happened.

Quillian noticed that the lift man looked at him with some curiosity on arriving at his destination; and on opening the door of his flat, his sensitive nostrils were assailed by a reek of tobacco; a moment or two later, he was aware that this was compounded of two distinct odours; one suggestive of shag, while the other was the aroma of a good cigarette.

Quillian was about to enter the drawing-room, but his attention was arrested by the handwriting of a letter amongst a pile of correspondence which awaited him on the hall table; he was about to disregard it for the present when something in its delicate distinction (it was plainly written by a woman) made him seize and tear open the envelope.

It contained a long letter signed by another hand; a hasty glance told him it was from the secretary of the Princess Royal Hospital, who had sent a communication to his Kentish home: he thrust it into his pocket for future consideration, and went into the dining-room.

An unexpected sight met his gaze. May Fothergill

lay curled up on a Chesterfield couch; she was fast asleep, and looked like a crumpled roseleaf: a box of gold-tipped Egyptian cigarettes, and a large, beribboned box of sweets were at her elbow.

The girl made such a sweet picture with her long eyelashes and disarranged hair that Quillian was interested in spite of himself; after regarding her for some moments, he resolved to seek out Grumby or Mrs. Gassmann before awaking her.

He stole from the room and made for the kitchen, where there was nothing to be seen of the charwoman; he would have concluded that Grumby was absent too, had not a snore proceeded from a large basket chair; he went to this, and found the insignificant form of the ex-sacristan also asleep; he had evidently been indulging in his conception of the flesh-pots, for his pipe had fallen from his mouth and lay on the floor; a beer-stained glass was beside it.

Quillian shook the sleeper.

It was no easy matter arousing him; first he opened one eye and cocked it at his master without appearing to recognize him; then he opened the other, and, on seeing who was before him, he made a pathetically transparent effort to awaken from a decorous and hardly earned slumber.

"You, sir! Bless my soul!" cried Grumby, and made unsteady efforts to rise to his feet.

"Yes. What does this mean?" asked Quillian sternly.

"M-mean, sir!" faltered Grumby: his utterance was thick and his breath beery.

"Yes, mean."

"Sir!" said Grumby, who tried hard to sort out his muddled wits.

Quillian opened the closed windows to let in wholesome air; by the time he again faced Grumby the latter had contrived to get on to his feet, but took the precaution of supporting himself by resting one hand on the chair.

"Well!" said Quillian.

"Sir!" returned the other, and rapidly blinked his eyes.

"You've been drinking!"

"M-me, sir?"

"The place smells of it. And where's Mrs. Gassmann?"

"Now you're asking me something, sir."

"Is she out?"

Grumby made as if to look round the kitchen in order to find her; in so doing he released his hold on the chair; he would have fallen had not Quillian clutched him by the arm.

The old man looked such a pathetic picture of misery at being thus found out that Quillian was moved to say:

"Grumby! Grumby! How could you!"

Grumby shamefacedly hung his head.

"I gave you a chance, and so wanted to find you trustworthy."

The old man put the hand that was free to his eyes.

"I hope this isn't a habit of yours," continued Quillian.

The air coming in at the window was doing something to revive the backslider.

"Yes, sir. I'm afraid I have erred and strayed: and to-day is a fast day too: mercy on me, a poor, miserable sinner, for what will become of me?"

"Pull yourself together, Grumby——"

"And with such a shining example as you, sir, before me——"

"I shall be angry if you talk like that."

"Very good, sir; I'll try and not remind you of it. And as for what I've done, I'll freely admit there isn't the shadow of an excuse. I'm a poor miserable sinner, and I shall never, never forgive myself till the last breath my frail body takes."

"Tell me this," said Quillian. "Is this usual or exceptional?"

"Quite exceptional, sir. And that's what makes it such a steep descent. If it were a 'abit, there'd be nothing to be said: as it is, it's a deliberate plunge into sin, sir. And ladies have seen in me a distinct likeness to St. Thomas Aquinas!"

"It's not so bad as you make out."

"Sir!" exclaimed Grumby, who strove to appreciate the fact of his master's leniency.

"And if it doesn't happen again, we'll say no more about it."

Grumby stared at his master with incredulous eyes; directly he was sensible of his good fortune, his consciousness of grievous sin was apparently forgotten; he became quite cheerful for an ascetic-looking man.

"Now you seem to understand what I'm talking about, tell me about Miss Fothergill," continued Quillian.

"Miss Fothergill?"

"Yes."

"There, sir; how stupid of me to forget! Till you mentioned her name, I forgot she was the cause of my backsliding."

"How can that be?" asked Quillian quickly.

"The trouble she's been, sir, and the constant anxiety she's been to me, let alone Mrs. Gassmann."

"In what way?"

"It all began over finding her aunt. She objected to my going with her; and when I reminded her it was by your orders, she gave me the slip and disappeared all day."

"Perhaps she tried to find her herself."

"Anyway, sir, she always came back with sweets and smokes; and never so much as offered me one."

"Is that so?"

"Not that I should take anything if she had, being uncertain of how she came by them."

"I mean, is it so that she came back with sweets and cigarettes?"

"May I suffer all the tortures of the damned, sir, which is only what they deserve, if I'm not speaking the truth. And if you doubt my word, sir, ask Mrs. Gassmann, who says she's found five-pound notes in the young lady's room."

"She says that!"

"Ask for yourself, sir."

"But where is Mrs. Gassmann?"

"Gone to her husband, sir, who, she says, is not long for this deceiving vale of tears."

Quillian was sorely troubled by this information, which he was disposed in some measure to believe since he had seen for himself some of the sweets and cigarettes mentioned by Grumby: and if he (Quillian) had been taken

in by a cleverly told tale, he was faced by a further difficulty—this, deciding what he should do with her.

If she were a designing minx, she would in all likelihood turn up her dainty nose at any situation Mrs. Lownes might offer her; on the other hand, he could not lightly send her about her business as, in washing his hands of her, he might be a means of assisting her to walk more devious ways than those she had already trod.

Quillian began to think that it would be as well if Tommy Chalfont were with him in order to supply worldly-wise advice from the storehouse of his experience; he had some thought of ringing him up upon the hotel telephone, but gave up the idea at reflecting that, in all probability, he was already tasting the sweets of London life with his friend.

There was evidently nothing for it but to tackle Miss Fothergill himself; he had no relish for the job; the more particularly since he had a suspicion that she would be more than a match for him.

He entered the room in which he had discovered her; apparently she had been aware of his return, for she was intent on a book; her hair was smoothed, and the sweets and cigarettes had been put away.

She started in mock surprise on hearing his footstep, and rose to greet him with a charming confusion which appalled him on account of its seeming artlessness.

"Good-afternoon," he said gravely, and merely touched the little hand she had put out.

"I didn't expect you back till much later," she began.

"I have been back some time," he said as before.

"Have you!"

"I came in here; but as you were asleep I did not like to disturb you."

"Yes; I'd been looking for work, and was rather tired."

"I've been talking to Grumby," he went on.

The girl's face clouded.

"And Mrs. Gassmann appears to be out."

"It's about time you did come back," declared Miss Fothergill; before he could tell her that he could only agree with her on top of all he had heard from Grumby, she continued:

"They do nothing but gossip and eat from morning to night; and Grumby is hardly ever sober. He smokes the most horrid tobacco all over the flat; indeed, you can smell it in here."

But for the sweets and cigarettes, Quillian would have been disposed to believe this innocent-looking girl before Grumby.

He was wondering how best to refer to the subject of these indulgences, when she said:

"Have you had tea?"

He told her he had not."

"What a shame! Why didn't you tell me before? I'll see about it at once."

"Thank you, but——"

"I know what you would say; it's no trouble at all; really it isn't."

She gave him the softest of glances; and he the more realized his helplessness, both with regard to her, and with what he should do in the event of Mrs. Gassmann confirming Grumby's allegations.

He realized that if he permitted her to put herself out for him in the matter of getting tea, he might be more disposed to overlooking her behaviour than the circumstances might warrant (he had quite made up his mind to be just in face of the appeal made by the girl's youth and comeliness), so he said:

"Thank you, but I won't trouble you."

"But it's no trouble," she protested.

"Grumby can very well get it, or I can go downstairs to the restaurant."

"No trouble at all," she went on; and smilingly passed by him on her way to the door just as this opened to admit Grumby.

"Mr. Thomas Chalfont," said Grumby.

"Hullo, old sport!" cried Tommy, as he entered. "Lucky——"

He said no more, and stared in undisguised astonishment at seeing Quillian's companion.

Quillian, who heartily wished Tommy had not called at that moment, turned to the girl and said:

"Now my friend has come, perhaps you would kindly get us some tea; and Grumby can bring it in."

Miss Fothergill tripped from the room; directly the two men were alone, Tommy hastened to explain his appearance, and with a manner suggesting that finding a man like Quillian alone with a young and pretty girl was all in the day's work to him.

"Sorry to bump into you so quickly, old dear——"

"I'm very glad you came," interrupted Quillian, "because——!"

It was now his turn to be cut short by the other, who said:

"Directly I got to the 'show,' there was a wire waitin' for me from Wiltshire, who was goin' to paint the town red with me: somethin' wrong with an aunt he's expectations from, and so I'm all on my 'ownio.'"

"As things have turned out, it's very fortunate," returned Quillian, who could not help noticing Tommy's increased indulgence in slang since he had come upon his friend and Miss Fothergill.

"I'm one of those fellows who can't stick bein' alone, an' so directly I heard Wiltshire was off, I came on to you."

"I was in such a quandary I thought of ringing you up," declared Quillian, who wished Tommy would give him a chance of explaining the girl's presence in his flat.

But Tommy was not to be withstood; he insisted on giving Quillian a life-history and character-sketch of his friend (apparently his most remarkable endowment was that he boasted of summing up a man by his ties), perhaps, because he prided himself on his nether-worldly-wise tact, and wished to give Quillian breathing space in which to make up a likely enough story regarding the girl.

At last Tommy had done with Wiltshire, and before he could start another subject, Quillian said:

"Now you must listen to me."

Tommy assumed his most credulous expression, and said:

"Fire away, old sport."

"I want to ask your advice about the young woman you saw here, and before she comes back."

"The pretty flapper! You've come to the right shop, old man; it's darned lucky for you Wiltshire's aunt has got the rickets or somethin'."

Quillian told his story as shortly as was possible; when he had finished, Tommy lit and reflectively smoked a cigarette.

"Well!" said Quillian.

"It's all as plain as a pikestaff to me."

"I'm very glad to hear it."

"You've been had, old man; mercilessly had. The girl is a designin' adventuress."

"You think so!"

"Think? Certain. All that old yarn about the aunt: thought she could have invented somethin' better."

"The next thing to decide is, what am I to do?"

"Eh!"

"I can't turn the girl out upon the streets: it would be on my conscience."

"Goin' to keep her here, then?" grinned Tommy.

"I spoke to Mrs. Lownes about her, and she promised to do her best to find something for her if the girl will work."

"I can see that little flapper doin' it."

"Then what do you suggest?"

Tommy was reflectively silent, before impressively saying:

"Do you feel inclined to leave things to me?" Before Quillian could so much as reply, the other went on: "Because, if you will, I'll do my best for you on three conditions."

"And those?" returned Quillian quickly: he feared Miss Fothergill might return any moment now.

"First, that you let me have ten minutes with her alone—that's easily worked."

"Yes, well——"

"That you do exactly as I advise; and, thirdly, that if I see you through, you'll admit I'm a friend in need."

"But you mustn't be too hard on her, and——"

Further conversation on the subject was prevented by the entrance of Miss Fothergill with tea.

Quillian soon found an excuse to leave the two together; upon again contriving to be alone with Tommy, he was much surprised by the latter saying:

"I'm altogether in the wrong, old dear."

"About Miss Fothergill?"

"If I make a 'bloomer,' particularly over a young and pretty girl, I ain't the chap to try and cover it up: I'm the first to admit it."

"Very creditable, but——"

"Isn't it! I could kick myself for ever havin' doubted her."

"I'm very glad to hear she isn't what you thought."

"I questioned her all about herself, and without givin' her the least idea I was pumpin' her, and every answer she gave me was gospel itself."

"Including the aunt!"

"That's all right: take the word of one who knows what he's talkin' about, about that. And as for the sweets and cigarettes, she found half a quid in the lining of her skirt—lost it a month ago yesterday—and bought the cigarettes for you and the sweets for herself."

"There's Grumby's story."

"You can understand why he's up against her. Take my word—and I know what I'm talkin' about—she's a helpless, innocent young thing."

"Then what does she propose doing?"

"I'm comin' to that. I mentioned to her you might get her a job; she'd simply jump at the chance. Quite pathetic to see how she's eager to do everythin' we wish."

Quillian did his best, and almost succeeded, in being of the same mind as Tommy regarding the girl; in order not to embarrass her after the former's suspicions and questions, the two men decided to go out for the evening: before they set out, Grumby was sent for Mrs. Gassmann, who promised to return from her husband's sick-bed with all despatch.

Thus it came about that Quillian got his first glimpse of what Tommy called 'Life': this consisted of dining in a smart restaurant, of spending two hours in the stalls of a music-hall, and of finishing up by having supper at a cabaret club—experiences Quillian found even duller than he had expected.

His boredom was mitigated at perceiving the abiding gusto with which Tommy Chalfont played showman to these particular booths of Vanity Fair.

CHAPTER XI

SISTER JANE

QUILLIAN sat on a chair in the Park.

He had had a further talk with Miss Fothergill before he had come out, and had told her of a situation that Mrs. Lownes had offered her in a letter that had come by the first post: the duties were light (they were to assist Mercia in her charitable works, and to write Mrs. Lownes's letters) and the pay adequate: the girl had professed eagerness to work, and she was to leave for Kent in two days' time.

Quillian had made a point of leaving her as much as possible to herself, in order to escape the least breath of scandal—this more particularly since Tommy Chalfont had waxed eloquent on her attractions during the latter part of the evening the two men had spent together.

Directly an opportunity had presented itself in the morning Quillian had had a word with Mrs. Gassmann regarding Miss Fothergill's conduct during his absence, and had soon given up the attempt at arriving at the truth of the matter as a bad job. Should he mention what Grumby had said, she confirmed his statements; on the other hand, should he give Miss Fothergill's version to Tommy, Mrs. Gassmann immediately declared it was nothing other than gospel; the fact of the matter was that a lifetime of charring had engrained in her the habit of crying ditto to everything her employers said.

Mrs. Lownes's letter was characteristic.

It mentioned the thankless task it was to help anyone; and that she had only put herself out of the way in this respect in order to oblige Quillian and to discover how far he had been imposed upon.

She could not understand at all why she did anything for him, because as a rule she detested religious men; she

believed she made an exception in his favour because he belonged to the only possible faith, since it had a great-hearted tolerance for the so-called 'wicked,' who were the salt of life.

She concluded by expressing interest in all the harm he and Mercia would bring about with their benevolent plans, which would simply encourage the lazy, the improvident, and the shifty to prey on the foolish-hearted.

There was more to the same effect, and running through it all was a vein of infinite sadness, together with concern for himself.

Beyond the foregoing, there was no mention of Mercia.

Quillian frankly liked Mrs. Lownes: for all her perversity of thought, he was sure that at heart they had much in common; she acted as a mental stimulant upon him, and he hoped to see a lot of her when he was married to Mercia.

This allusion to the young woman to whom he was practically engaged reminded him how comparatively little she had been in his thoughts—this in spite of the fact of his having come to the Park, and to a secluded part of it at that, in order to indulge in romantic imaginings concerning her.

Directly he had sat down, his attention had been taken up by the irresponsible joyousness of the sunshine; the passing motor-cars and carriages containing smart men and women; perhaps most of all in the happy, chubby children, who walked or played under the more or less watchful eyes of nursemaids.

He found it necessary to remind himself that it was his duty to think of Mercia as much as it was humanly possible; in so doing, he discovered how hard it was for him to recall her features: try as he might, she seemed more an abstraction of fine qualities than a creature of flesh and blood, and he was not a little troubled by this nebulousness: he was certain he loved her, and that she was the one woman in the world for him (had not Father Akhurst as good as said so?); on the other hand, he wished in the secret places of his heart that she had a more vivid personality, so that she could be with him, as it were, for all their separation.

Once more he put down this inability to visualize her to his lack of worthiness for such an one as she; directly Miss Fothergill was packed off to Kent, he would set about fighting the good fight which would justify his claiming Mercia's hand.

Quillian pondered these things, and almost before he was aware of it, he was attracted by a bright-eyed little girl; she was clambering about a young woman, who was sitting a little distance away, and was intent on a novelette.

The child was daintily dressed, and was overflowing with health and high spirits: since she could not engage the attention of her nurse, she talked lightly to herself; now and again she sang snatches of nursery rhymes.

She perceived Quillian's interest in her; and glanced first shyly, and then boldly at him.

He fondly regarded her pretty movements; and fell to thinking of the exquisite blessing these girl children were; and of the fine part they were allotted on the stage of life.

To begin with, they were treasures above price to their parents; and upon their attaining adolescence, apart from being the pride of their respective fathers and mothers, they would be the lode-star of some honest man, whose days would be undefiled owing to the love that welled in his heart.

In the course of time, they would fulfil their natural destiny and would become wives; later, the mothers of such as they were in the long ago: then, upon their children attaining years of discretion, they, as wise mothers, would give them good counsel, and their declining days would be gladdened by the love and honour with which they were cherished by those to whom they had imparted the peerless gift of life.

Thus reflected Quillian, who only saw one side of the matter, and that the most romantic, before his thoughts sharply reverted to Mercia, since it occurred to him that his union with her would give him children of his own.

Somehow, and he was angry with himself for the suggestion, the irresponsible fancies that had a knack of presenting themselves when they were least wanted, hinted

that there was something a little incongruous in the fact of the saintly Mercia being a mother; mothering orphanless little ones, perhaps, and teaching them the rudiments of her creed; but as the female of the male of her species——

Quillian was grateful his attention was claimed by the pretty child who was shyly approaching where he sat: she almost came within reach; but upon his putting out his arm, she laughingly drew back; encouraged by his smiles, she again came towards him; upon his succeeding in catching her, he stroked her hair before kissing her on the forehead.

Something made him look in the direction of the roadway, where he perceived a pair of dark feminine eyes regarding him from a luxurious motor-car which was slowly passing; their owner smiled and bowed, and his hand went to his hat: it was only after she had gone some way that he recollected she was none other than Mrs. Chatillon, the woman he had come to know in the train on journeying from Dover to London.

He had forgotten her existence, and never expected to see her again: strange she should have come upon him when he had fondled a child for the first time in his life.

The latter was sharply called by her nurse just then; she reluctantly left Quillian, and was conducted away (she repeatedly looked back), and he was once more free to indulge his recollections of Mrs. Chatillon.

He had instinctively recognized that she was a combination of soul and body, and an alluring one at that; the mere fact of her having passed and smiled urged his thoughts in her direction; it was only upon his realizing that these were in the nature of a disloyalty to Mercia, that he was aware of the indefiniteness of outline presented by his betrothed by the side of Mrs. Chatillon.

Then it occurred to him how different were some of the women he had met from his former ecclesiastical estimate.

Not long back, he had divided them into sheep and goats; now he was certain that Mrs. Lownes and Mrs. Chatillon could not come under either of these heads, and were an elusive mingling of clay and gold: he did not seek to deny that if, from one point of view, he was

disturbed by this discovery, there was no gainsaying their individual fascination.

Quillian put his hand in his pocket for Mrs. Lownes's letter, which he wanted to reread; he pulled out instead the envelope containing the further appeal from the Princess Royal Hospital, and was again interested in the handwriting in which it was written and addressed.

He gazed at it for some moments, and had he not made up his mind to call on Father Horan at the Wapping Mission in the afternoon, for want of something to do, he might have decided to call at the hospital: as it was, it was more likely than not that he would go there on the morrow.

He knew that, considering the nature of his relations with Mercia, he had no business to be interested in the feminine owner of an unusual hand, but told himself that his visit might mean the beginnings of the social service to which he ached to devote himself for the next few months.

At something after three, Quillian got out at Wapping Station, and was at once sensible of the unrelieved squalor which obtained on every side: the meanest of mean streets alternated with grim warehouses; and the men and women he saw were weighed down with a poverty that was naked and unashamed.

There seemed very much that was wanting in the arrangement of things whereby he had more than he knew what to do with, while here was abject want; it was with a heavy heart that he asked the way to Father Horan's presbytery.

On getting there, he saw a stout, jolly-looking priest talking to a poor woman; something she said before taking her leave made the former laugh loudly and long.

"Father Horan?" asked Quillian.

"You've just missed him," replied the other, who spoke with a strong Irish accent. "And is there anything I can do for ye?"

Before Quillian could reply, the other was again held by laughter; presently he said:

"There's Mrs. O'Hara was asking for him just now; and she mentioned the illness of Father Murphy, and she

said: 'Shure, there's Father Murphy always telling us what a blessed place heaven is, and now he's ill, he's got three doctors to keep him from going there.' "

Quillian laughed, before asking where he might be likely to find Father Horan.

He was told he might be at the chapel, and upon being directed thither, he made for this place; on entering the tiny place of worship, which was situated next door to a chandler's shop, there was no one to be seen.

He knelt for a while in prayer; on rising from his knees, he sat for a while on the *prie-Dieu*, and was lost in meditation.

Then he was aware of another presence in the church; on looking about him, he saw that he was being narrowly eyed by a short, thick-set, middle-aged woman, who was dressed in black.

On seeing that she had been perceived, she moved a little away, and appeared to be busy with the rearrangement of a tiny side-altar; in spite of her occupation, she repeatedly glanced at Quillian.

It occurred to him that she would be likely to know the whereabouts of Father Horan; rising from his seat, he approached her, and made known his request.

"Do you want him badly?" she asked, in a refined and rather deep voice.

"I should like to see him if it's possible."

"He was here about twenty minutes ago, but was called to a sick parishioner."

"I must have just missed him."

"Perhaps, if you are in no great hurry, you may care to wait," said the woman, who rarely took her black eyes (her most attractive feature) from his face.

"I'm rather anxious to see him, so think I will."

"He works so hard, it's not an easy matter to catch him."

"I should think there was plenty to do in Wapping," remarked Quillian grimly.

"Even at the best, it's like a drop in the ocean."

"I saw another priest at Father Horan's house."

"Father Barry. He's a friend of Father Horan's, and often comes over."

"I should have been here some time back, but Father Horan was away."

"We had to take him by the shoulders and make him go. He would have completely broken down otherwise."

Quillian resolved to send Father Horan a handsome cheque.

There was a silence, during which he noticed that the woman was attentively regarding him; presently she said:

"Are you Mr. Quillian?"

"Yes; how do you know?" he returned in some surprise.

"Father Horan has often spoken of you since he has been back. He heard from Father Timothy, the Guardian of the Monastery at Ypres."

"I understood he was going to write."

"I have often thought of you and wondered what you were like."

"Indeed!"

"It's—it's such a strange experience for a man."

Upon his making no reply, she said:

"If we go to Father Horan's lodging, there is a chance he may go straight back there."

They left the chapel, and on getting into the sunlight, Quillian saw that his companion was plainer than she had seemed in the dim light of the chapel. She had more than a suspicion of a moustache; and had quite a large mouth—indeed, her face would have been unpleasant but for her black eyes, which were instinct with emotion.

"Strange I should meet you like this," she said, after mentioning she was a member of the Third Order of Women affiliated to the Franciscan Fraternity; and that she was called "Sister Jane."

Before he could reply, she went on: "When I saw you, I wondered if it were you!"

"Indeed!" remarked Quillian. He was not a little surprised at the interest she appeared to take in him.

Perhaps she had an inkling of his thoughts, for she said:

"The Guardian at Ypres spoke so highly of you, and

was so fearful of what would happen to you, that I was anxious to see what you were like."

"There is no occasion for him to worry."

"Are you so worldly-wise?" she asked, and bent her black eyes on his face.

"If I'm not, I'm rapidly becoming so."

"I doubt it."

"Why?"

"I've an unhappy knack of reading people."

"Why unhappy?"

"Isn't it better to take everything and everyone at their face value?"

Once more, Quillian was aware of a certain bitterness of outlook; he voiced his thoughts, and said:

"Nearly everyone I meet seems to suffer from some sort of disillusion."

"Naturally, unless one happens to be one of the happy, irresponsible children of all ages."

"There you go again," he remarked.

"One can't work in a place like this and keep one's ideals."

"It's the saddest place I've seen so far."

"And then the rich and idle wonder why there's social discontent."

"Who are the people who live here?"

"The poorest class of dock and casual labourer: men who are willing and eager for work which isn't too often forthcoming. It's places such as this which make one doubt the reality of civilization so-called—and many other things."

"What other things?" he asked sharply.

"I mustn't start our acquaintance by depressing you. How did you get on with Father Akhurst?"

"Very well."

"Isn't he rather the typical ecclesiastic?"

"You know him!"

"I've never met him, but I've seen his letters which have been about you. Perhaps you're surprised at my knowing so much about Father Horan's affairs. He's so simple in some things that I have to mother him."

"I hope I shall see him to-day."

"He's the dearest, kindest man in the world; and although his mission is very, very poor, it's wonderful the money he gets, and mostly from practising the most hard and fast self-denial. Over and over again, he's been in actual want from giving to those he thinks are in greater need than himself."

They had reached the door of Father Horan's lodging; on entering the living-room, Quillian was surprised at its bareness. There was a deal table; three or four Windsor chairs; a few books on a home-made shelf; a large crucifix on the wall; and that was practically all.

"I don't suppose he'll be long, if you can find time to wait," remarked the woman; on noticing Quillian looking round the apartment, she added: "And this is a man who comes of a good English family."

They sat (Quillian's chair was rickety), and his companion said:

"How long have you been in England?"

"Over a month now."

"And you have spent most of the time in London?"

"All of it, except when I was in Kent."

"Did you meet many people there?"

"Far more than I expected."

"Lord Vaucourt?"

"Yes."

"Sir Percy Philbrick?"

"You know, then?"

"I once stayed in that part of the world. Mrs. Lownes?"

"Y-yes."

"You like her?" said the other woman quickly.

"Why do you say that?"

"I can see you do."

"She was very kind to me."

"Naturally."

"Why 'naturally'?"

"You will find that most women you meet will be interested in you."

"I don't see why."

"Shall I tell you?"

"More cynicism!"

"Not because you have money and all that sort of thing—that would only be an obvious and, therefore, a vulgar reason—but because the very nature of your celibate life is, at once, a challenge to us."

"Why a challenge?"

"As a sex we are very vain; it's implanted in us to allure and conquer with the weapons—such as they are—with which nature has endowed us. You, with your past profession of celibacy have, as it were, told us that, so far as you are concerned, we do not count in the scheme of things, and surely that is more than enough to—to provoke our resentment and, perhaps, make us like you."

"Do you know, you have greatly astonished me?"

"By what I have told you?"

"Not so much that as the fact of your saying it."

"I wasn't always what I am now."

"Indeed!"

"If you care to know——"

"Of course I do," said Quillian, upon her pausing.

"I didn't think you'd be interested. Once upon a time I was of the world, and very, very worldly. And then——"

"And then——"

"But I was not happy. And then I found this."

"You gave up everything to work for the poor and needy?"

"I assure you there was no particular virtue in my doing so——"

"That is what you say."

"Anything but. We are all out for happiness, and this happens to be where I, personally, am able to get the most."

Here was a further surprise for Quillian, inasmuch as a woman who appeared of the type that was content to devote its days to good works was admitting to a desire for happiness that was of the world, worldly.

He must have shown his thoughts in his face, for she said:

"I've surprised you."

"I must confess you have."

"Who was it who said 'that the last thing that will be civilized by man is woman'?"

"Someone who has a very low estimation of your sex."

"As it happens, it was someone who, perhaps, knew more about them than any man of his time. But I mustn't help to disillusion you. And I've spoken quite enough about myself for one day. Why are you here and not with one of Mrs. Lownes's attractive daughters?"

"I have come back to work."

"To work?"

"Since you know so much of my affairs, you are, doubtless, aware why I left the monastery at Ypres."

"I gathered the reason."

"Before I can accept what is, perhaps, the greatest of God's blessings, I want to do something to deserve such a gift."

She looked at him sharply, appraisingly, much as if to discover if he were wholly sincere; there was not the least reason for doubt, she told herself, indeed, she was not a little ashamed of her suspicion, and she said:

"I suppose you know what you're up against!"

"You are not the first person who has said that," he returned; "and I can only reply what I did before—that I had ample warning from the good Guardian at Ypres."

"As if anyone ever listened to advice when——"

"When——" he repeated as she paused.

"When they love a woman."

He was silent, and she went on:

"And as you would love a woman if ever you did love."

"Would it be so serious?" he asked.

"I don't think I would be far wrong in saying it would be body and soul with you."

His thoughts flew to Mercia; he was by no means sure he could tell himself that such was the case where she was concerned.

"Are you certain?" he asked.

"Certain. And for all my work here, I'm ever so worldly-wise apart from my woman's instinct in such matters."

Quillian was disturbed by the fact of his affection for

Mercia not being of the world-well-lost-for-love order; he was wondering if time would strengthen it until it reached such formidable proportions, when she said:

"And what work do you propose to do?"

"That is where I am so helpless."

"Is it that you can't find anything to do in the world?" she asked grimly.

"You must surely know it's not that," he returned.

"There is so much, one doesn't know where to make a start."

"I know what I should do if I were a man of your stamp and with your opportunities."

"My Guardian told me I should do well if I succeeded in plucking but one brand from the burning."

"One!" she cried scornfully.

"It doesn't seem very much."

"Individuals must look after themselves; it's the millions I'm thinking about," she declared, and with a warmth of which he had not thought her capable.

"Whom do you mean? The millions of unconverted humanity?"

"Indeed no!" she cried scornfully. "They have religions suited to their needs, and get along well enough in their own way. It's the millions in this England of ours I'm thinking about, not so much their spiritual salvation—that can come later—as having the bare human rights here on earth."

"Are things so bad?"

"Look at Wapping."

"Surely Wapping is—must be—exceptional."

"Anything but: and your mission should be, not to the poor, but to the rich, frivolous men and women, who live a round of dull pleasures in the vain hope of escaping from themselves. Go to them and ask them why they are doing nothing for their country; for their down-trodden, sweated brothers and sisters—you would only be laughed at for your pains—and see if you can influence them one whit."

"What would it avail if, as you say, they would not listen?"

Apparently she did not hear, for she went on as before:

"And the butterflies of life are by no means the worst, let me tell you. There are thousands of dull, stupid, well-meaning people, who salve their conscience by giving much to alleviate misery which is largely caused by the conditions under which their wealth is produced. They want to be roused and—and——"

"Yes," he said, upon her stopping for breath.

"And these are by no means all. There are the comfortable beneficed dignatories in all denominations who do their narrow little round of duty; they either shut their eyes to the terrible evils which exist, or tell themselves that, since everything is ordered by Providence, they may be safely ignored."

The unorthodox complexion of her last words astonished him; he looked at the flushed face, which was now almost handsome, and said:

"Do you know what you are saying?"

"I think so," she returned calmly.

"But——"

"You won't be surprised if you know me better—that is, if you ever do. But women who think and feel, particularly those who feel, often get out of hand; and the best of them never really know themselves."

She realized she had given him much of a shock; in the effort to efface the impression she had made, she talked of everyday things, including the prolonged absence of Father Horan.

"I suppose he will be back sometime," he said.

"Are you in a hurry?"

"Not particularly."

"Perhaps I bore you?" she urged.

"Indeed no."

"Sure?"

"Ever so sure."

"I'm not asking for vain reasons—at least, I don't think so—but if I don't, I should like the opportunity of hearing what you are doing from time to time, and, if I might, of advising you."

"You are very kind."

"And if I bored you now, I should never be able to help you."

Quillian thanked her; a few minutes later, a knock was heard at the door; and upon the Sister saying "Come in," a ragged little girl entered, and said that Father Horan had been summoned to a parishioner who had met with a bad accident; that the priest was accompanying the injured man to the hospital; and that he wanted Sister Jane to come to the child's mother whom he had been previously attending.

"Go at once, and don't mind me," said Quillian.

"I'm afraid it is not much use your waiting now," she returned. "And you will come again soon?"

"Very soon," he assured her.

"Thank you," she said.

Quillian put money into the child's hand; took leave of Sister Jane, who seemed a little reluctant to let him go; and, pondering over all he had seen and heard, took his way homeward.

A surprise awaited him at the flat, where Mrs. Gassmann and Grumby, both speaking at once, told him that Miss Fothergill had disappeared since the morning: she had left no word; and had taken her few belongings.

CHAPTER XII

ST. TERESA IN THE FLESH

"SHE ain't come back, sir."

"Miss Fothergill?"

"No, sir."

"I didn't expect she would."

"And me laying awake, an' worrying about the poor dear all night."

"I suppose she had a good reason for going?"

"Oh yes, sir; still, I wasn't surprised."

"Why?"

"A picter fell down yes'day mornin'; an' that's always a sign somethin's going to happen."

"You surely don't believe such nonsense, Mrs. Gassmann!"

"I can't 'elp believin' it, sir, seein' its true. Jess before my 'usband were took bad wif his last illness, I see one sparrer 'op over the back of another. That's always a sign the doctor 'll be called in."

"Your husband is no better!"

"An' never will be, sir," returned Mrs. Gassmann cheerfully.

"I'm sorry."

"An' there's one thing; when he do go, he'll die up-pards."

"What do you mean?"

"Most when they 'lays down their knife and fork' dies downwards. But from the nature of Gassmann's complaint, Gassmann will die up-pards," she declared proudly.

Quillian kept back a smile.

"Still, I don't mind, sir," she went on. "I've a good pair of arms that ain't afraid of work, an' I can always earn my bit of bread and cheese."

"What caused his illness?"

"Gassmann's too fond of a drop of drink, sir. 'Ee's already had two strokes, and his face is all twisted; and the doctor says he mustn't touch another drop."

"I hope he won't then."

"He's promised me faithful, sir, he won't look at a pot o' beer. But there! 'Ee's said that so many times."

"Can he get about?"

"With a couple of sticks, sir."

"How do you know he won't get out and drink while you're here?"

"I'll watch that, sir."

"What do you mean?"

"'Ee's given me his word he won't, and I've pawned 'is boots an' coat so 'ee can't get out, sir," declared Mrs. Gassmann triumphantly. "An' Gassmann's too proud to be seen in the street without 'is coat, let alone 'is boots."

The entrance of Tommy Chalfont interrupted the conversation, a Tommy Chalfont who looked rosy and cheerful compared with his overnight anxiety at learning from Quillian of Miss Fothergill's disappearance.

"Hullo, old sport: how goes it?" he cried on catching sight of Quillian.

"Heard anything?" asked Quillian, directly the two men were alone.

"N'no."

"You seemed so cheerful, I hoped you had."

"I've been thinkin' things over: laid awake last night ever so long—quite half an hour—worryin' about it, and if I think everything's all right, you've no reason to be upset."

"My responsibility is scarcely on all fours with yours," returned Quillian.

"Don't forget you put the whole thing into my hands, and that I told you to trust her implicitly."

"That's true."

"Well, there you are. It's my opinion she didn't fancy the job with Mrs. Lownes, and has got on to somethin' else more congenial, and didn't like to own up."

"That's a bit optimistic," declared Quillian.

"Trust me for knowin' what's what."

"I'm divided between two opinions."

"Let's have 'em," said Tommy, and in the manner of one who is anxious to show his toleration of points of view for which he has scant regard.

"Either she's fallen into one of the snares set for pretty girls——"

"She took her belongin's with her," interrupted Tommy.

"Or both of us have been sadly taken in."

"Impossible!" cried Tommy.

"You really think so?"

"I don't think: I know."

"It's all very perplexing."

"To you perhaps, old chap; women are strange cattle to you. But you forget *me*. I read 'em like a book; and she was as good and true as gold. Take my word for it."

"If that's so, it only makes me the more anxious."

"She's all right," declared Tommy confidently.

"I still think we should have told the police last night."

"Eh?"

"And I've half a mind to now."

Tommy became considerably excited, and said:

"They're 'no earthly.' It's no use botherin' with them. They'd want to know all sorts of things, an' 'ud think it d——n—beg pardon—funny your takin' her in at all."

"I shouldn't care what they thought."

"Perhaps not. All the same, don't you go to them. Take it from me: and if she has gone to another job, it won't do her any good havin' all sorts of inquiries made about her."

Tommy said much more in the same strain, and Quillian, rather against his will, suffered himself to be convinced by the other's argument.

"Then you agree with me?" said Tommy, after he had reduced the other to silence.

"I suppose I do."

"Now I'll be off."

"It's a very short stay."

"Dare say you're busy!"

"Not particularly."

"Anyway, I am. Old friends to look up, and all that. See you again soon."

"I hope so."

"And have another giddy evenin'! What!"

Tommy went off; immediately he had gone, Quillian sat down to the ever-increasing post which awaited his attention: as he had expected, it mostly consisted of begging appeals in formulas he was getting to know by heart.

He again sorted out the few that appeared genuine from the others, and before replying to the former resolved to take either Sister Jane's or Father Horan's advice; he also wrote to both of these (he enclosed a substantial cheque as his contribution towards the expenses of the Mission) and asked for an early appointment.

He had not forgotten the Princess Royal Hospital, and more with the idea of killing time than anything else, he set off in the direction of the Fulham Road at something after three: he took a 'bus to the Oratory, and on getting down, asked to be directed to his destination.

Rather to his surprise, those he spoke with knew nothing about it, even a hospital nurse professed blank ignorance; he walked the Fulham Road a long way, and not discovering what he sought, he entered quite a lot of shops; those behind the counter could give him no information until a milkman told him he believed the Princess Royal Hospital was at the Walham Green end, which was still some distance away.

On nearing Redcliffe Gardens, he was passed by a motor-bus; his attention was attracted by the figure of a girl who sat on top: she was tall, and shapely, and young; and her head of chestnut-coloured hair was covered by a large straw hat, trimmed with a red riband.

Something about her held his interest; he wondered who and what she was.

The bus slowed down before stopping; on seeing her rise from her seat, preparatory to getting off, Quillian quickened his step.

She seemed ever so tall standing up there; and for all the awkwardness of the descent, there was no denying

the prettiness of her movements: he wished the big hat did not hide her face so that he could see if this were anything like so charming as her figure.

She reached the pavement before he caught her up, and set off in the direction in which he was going: and for all his telling himself he had no business to be interested in any woman other than Mercia, he could not help noticing that she wore a tight-fitting skirt which called attention to her shapeliness; that she had the slimmest of ankles; and little feet.

The constraint of her frock caused her to take short steps; these, when allied with her graceful motions, were of a provoking daintiness; indeed, she walked in a manner that was so alien to the shambling of the everyday Englishwoman that Quillian began to wonder if she had Latin blood in her veins.

Quillian strode forward and was soon at her heels; he did not care to pass her, since he did not wish to lose sight of her without seeing her face should opportunity offer: it went much against the grain for him to get before her, and stare round, as he had seen so many do in like circumstances.

And as he followed her, most of those they encountered, and almost irrespective of sex, stared hard at her; and from this he believed she must be unusually comely to look upon.

He became sharply aware of what an unseemly thing he was doing in dogging the footsteps of an unprotected girl; and almost stopped; even as he did so, she turned and looked him in the face.

Quillian was conscious of sweet, if sad, hazel eyes; of a fleeting memory of the saint in stained glass above the high altar in the chapel at Ypres; of the quick beating of his heart.

For the fraction of a second, they looked upon each other, and by the time Quillian had found his mental bearings, she was some way off and was about to disappear in a bend of the road.

He was violently moved to follow her; at the same time, he withheld his eager steps: he was aware that the mere sight of this young woman, whomsoever she

might be, had made a profound appeal to him, and one that was wholly removed from anything he had yet experienced; upon his seeking to tell himself that surely such an interest justified his indulging a harmless curiosity with regard to seeing what became of her, conscience reproved him for anything in the nature of a mental infidelity to the one to whom he was practically betrothed.

Quillian was pulled this way and then that; by the time he again set off in the direction he believed the hospital to be, there was small possibility of his overtaking her.

Quillian duly found the hospital on the farther side of the way: it was an ordinary, three-storied, basemented, semi-detached house, and a large board behind the railings announced in big lettering the name of the institution; the fact that it was entirely supported by voluntary contributions of which the smallest would be thankfully received; and the name of the secretary, Reginald Stone Hemmingay.

There was an atmosphere of drabness about the place which, had not Quillian been discomposed by his recent experience, in all likelihood would have decided him to let the hospital and its works severely alone; as it was, he opened the gate, and went up the not overclean steps with no very clear idea of what he was at.

There were three bells, one above the other, and respectively marked 'Day;' 'Night;' 'House:' he pulled the first, and not hearing an answering sound, he tried the last: even then he had to try again before there were signs of life.

He had an impression that the window-blind was shifted, much as if someone were seeking to discover whom the caller might be; a few moments later, the opening of a door was followed by a hesitating step in the hall, and Quillian was faced by a middle-aged man who, notwithstanding much that was objectionable in his appearance, had a distinct suggestion of refinement.

He was tallish; and stout; and flabby; and bald; he had greenish eyes, which had a trick of looking anywhere than at the man who stood on the threshold.

"Good-afternoon," he said to Quillian.

"Good-afternoon. My name is Quillian."

"Quillian!" returned the other; and as if seeking to recall the name.

"You wrote to me several times."

This further information apparently conveyed nothing of moment, for the one addressed said:

"We are doing such a er—er noble work that we er—er in the nature of things issue many appeals to the er—er benevolent."

"I had one or two letters in Kent; and the other to my flat in Westminster."

"Oh! Ah! Yes. You are Mr. Paul Quillian. Forgive me if it escaped my memory, but I am so overburdened with work this morning, it's perhaps excusable. But come inside. Delighted to meet you."

Quillian was not further disposed in the man's favour by the artificial cordiality with which these words were said.

"If you are so busy——" he began.

"We are never too busy to acquaint the public with the philanthropic nature of our work. Come inside, my dear sir. As I dare say you've guessed, I'm Reginald Hemmingay, the Secretary of the institution."

So saying, he led the way into the room on the left, where Quillian had only eyes for the surprising fact that seated and writing at a table littered with papers was none other than the young woman he had seen get off the bus, and who had so powerfully attracted him in the street.

Quillian was again aware of the thumping of his heart against his ribs; he stood stock-still, and infrequent words and phrases of Hemmingay's pierced his blurred understanding.

"Really delighted to meet you—my daughter Vesper—assists me in my good work—heart and soul in it—she thought you might be the new visiting physician."

Quillian had only eyes for Miss Hemmingay, who, after glancing with an impersonal curiosity at the new-comer, went on with the work his entrance had interrupted; she was writing envelopes, and took the addresses from a seedy-looking Post Office Directory.

"Sit down, my dear sir; sit down," was the next thing

he was conscious Hemmingay was saying: upon his doing as he was bid, the other added: "I presume you called to make a few inquiries?"

Upon Quillian admitting this was so, Hemmingay said:

"Quite right, my dear sir; quite right. In these days of bogus charities and fraudulent benevolent institutions, one cannot be too careful where one gives; that is, of course, provided one is a—er—giver."

He cast a sidelong glance at Quillian; apparently satisfied with his scrutiny, he went on:

"Such similar institutions as the London; Guy's; Bart's; and so on, get most of the popular support that is going; discriminating givers, however, do not forget those hospitals which are not doing less good work, even if their light is somewhat hid under a bushel."

"Quite so," assented Quillian absently; while Hemmingay had been speaking, his attention had been held by the girl's face which, with the delicate correspondence of its expression to her thoughts, had become hard and set.

"Just 'down' from Oxford?" asked Hemmingay.

"No."

"Not?"

"I was not educated at Oxford."

"Could have sworn you were. Thought you were a New College man. I was at New College in the late seventies."

Quillian, perhaps from his proximity to Miss Hemmingay, was thereupon moved to a like confidence.

"I was educated abroad," he said, and even as he spoke was aware of the girl pausing in her addressing and of giving heed to what he said.

"May I ask where?" from her father.

"At Ypres."

"Ypres!"

"In Belgium. South Flanders, to be more particular."

"I had no idea there was any sort of school there——"

"It was not a school in the ordinary sense," interrupted Quillian.

"Unless it was a monastery!"

Quillian would not have replied, and would have left it

at that, had not Miss Hemmingay lifted her sad eyes to his face.

"It was a monastery," he said quietly.

"Ah, of course! Where is my memory! Now I know something of the facts."

"You do?" asked Quillian in surprise.

Hemmingay was conscious of a note of displeasure in the other's voice, for he said:

"Unless I'm muddling them up with something else. Men in my responsible position hear so much about others, and all that sort of thing, that one must not be surprised at anything I may know or the tangles I get in."

"Quite so," said Quillian, who was taking more and more of a dislike to Hemmingay, and would have shaken the dust of the hospital from his feet as soon as maybe, had it not been for the girl at the table.

There was a silence during which Quillian furtively watched Miss Hemmingay, who went on with her addressing, while her father stood with his back to the fireplace, and swelled with self-conscious importance.

Quillian found himself involuntarily contrasting the girl with Mercia; it seemed to him the former made an appeal to the senses which was strangely lacking in the young woman to whom he was practically betrothed; he wondered if Miss Hemmingay possessed any of the noble qualities which distinguished the eldest Miss Lownes, and in his fervent admiration of her comeliness was disposed to credit her with a full measure.

Hemmingay interrupted his thoughts.

"Now, my dear sir, as I presume that you have called to inquire into the merits of our work, perhaps you would like to have some particulars."

"It might be as well," assented Quillian.

"And I take it that as—ahem, seeing for yourself is more convincing than assertions, you might care to look over our hospital. *Facta non verba*. Eh?"

"If I should not be in the way."

"Vesper, my dear" (Quillian pricked up his ears at hearing this name), "tell the—er—head matron that I shall shortly conduct a distinguished visitor round the wards."

The girl rose to her gracious height (in so doing, she seemed to dwarf her objectionable father) and left the room without so much as glancing at Quillian, a fact he was quick to notice: directly she had gone, it seemed to him as if the sunlight had gone out of the sky.

Thereupon Hemmingay, who had not failed to notice Quillian's interest in Vesper, talked and talked presumably about the hospital, for Quillian did not give him any heed; his thoughts were with the absent girl; he marvelled how a man like her father could have such a daughter, whom Quillian's quick fancy endowed with a consuming passion to heal the sick and tend the infirm: doubtless, he told himself, it was she who was the guiding spirit of the work; and the force of her sweet personality had enlisted Hemmingay's co-operation.

At last, after what seemed an interminable interval, the girl came back, and the world to Quillian was a very different place.

"Well, my dear——" said Hemmingay affectionately.

"You'd better see Mrs. Hunt," she returned in a voice that, for all its listlessness, was low and musical, and of a quality that further stirred Quillian: she still kept her eyes to the ground.

"Are we able to proceed?"

"You'd better see Mrs. Hunt," she remarked as before.

"Excuse me, Quillian," said the Secretary, and left the room.

Quillian had risen at Vesper's entrance; he still stood, and watched her listless progress to her seat, where she went on with her interminable addressing: nothing was heard for some moments but the scratching of her pen.

He watched her so far as he dare, and almost fearfully noted her delicate features, which would have given her the face of a sweet-looking child were it not for a slightly large mouth; the upper lip was curved in a set disdain.

Quillian regarded the slim fingers at their seemingly endless task; presently, upon the pen making a slip, she made a little cry of annoyance.

"May I help you?" he said.

"Why should you?" she replied, and without looking up.

"You have so much to do."

"It is my job," she declared coldly.

"That is no reason why I shouldn't help."

"If you want to help, father will see to that."

A spice of contempt in her voice somewhat rebuffed Quillian; for want of something better, he said:

"Your father seems very enthusiastic."

"Naturally."

"It isn't given to all of us to spend our lives in good works."

The girl looked sharply at him (Quillian thrilled at the glance), and after dropping her eyes, she said:

"It's his job."

This was in the nature of a poser to Quillian, who looked for more than a little keenness in the work of the hospital.

A further silence was broken by her saying:

"Do you really want to help?"

"It is the reason why I came."

"To help me, I mean."

"Of course," he declared, and ever so quickly.

"Then read out these infernal addresses."

"You read and I'll write."

"Writing's a bother."

"It's assisting you," said Quillian, who all but blushed at his forwardness.

The girl took off her hat and threw it in a corner of the room; Quillian stood stock-still, and stared at the masses of rich hair which were coiled about her head.

"Come along," she said in a business-like way; Quillian took her seat.

"Where are you going to sit?" he asked, at noticing she stood.

"I'm sick of sitting. It will do me good to stand. Ready?"

"Quite."

"Now, then. 'J. F. C. Mudd, Esq., J.P., M.V.O.' Put it all in, otherwise they won't open it. '17, King's Gate, S.W.'"

Quillian wrote hard for some minutes; beyond the dictation of the names and addresses nothing was said, until he remarked:

"I'm afraid I don't write nearly so well as you do."

"Rot!"

"You write such a beautiful hand."

"Why do you say that?" she asked lifelessly.

"Because I think so. It is one of the reasons—if not the chief—why I came here."

"How can that be?" she asked as before.

"It attracted me."

She gave him another appraising glance, and he said:

"Strange I should have seen you get off the bus."

"You noticed me!"

"Of course; I was behind you for some time."

"I believe I saw you."

"You noticed me?" he asked eagerly.

"I've a memory for faces," she replied in her spiritless voice.

Notwithstanding her depressing lack of interest in him, Quillian went on:

"I little thought then that you were one of those who give their life to doing good."

"How do you mean?" she asked, and almost sharply.

"Doing your utmost for the sick."

The girl's face hardened.

"Don't you love your work?" he went on.

The girl laughed discordantly.

"In the consciousness that you're doing something to relieve the burden of the world's misery!"

She again glanced at him, and reflected for a moment, before saying:

"Do you think that of me?"

"Of course."

"Then you may as well know I loathe the sick; I hate the infirm; and despise invalids," she cried, and with a disquieting note of passion in her voice.

"I don't believe it!" he replied hotly.

"You must. I do this because father has taken it on, and we must do something. But I hate it; hate it; hate it! And if I had my way, I'd never look at a sick person again. Do you believe me now?"

Quillian shook his head: he was moved to further

denial, while his ears were echoing with the exquisite modulations of her voice.

"Not?"

"A thousand times no."

"Why don't you believe it?" she asked in all astonishment.

"Because something within me I implicitly trust says it is not so, and tells me you are good, and kind, and tender—and——"

Emotion bridled his tongue; the next thing he was conscious of was that she was staring at him in sheer amazement: he boldly met her look, and succeeded in holding her glance until he noticed a helplessness dawning in her eyes.

He was embarrassed by his outburst; in order to put their relations on their former footing, he said:

"What about our addressing?"

"What about it?" she said hesitatingly.

"I'm doing nothing. I'd got to 'John Muddock.'"

"No," she said.

"But——"

"You shan't do any more."

"Why not?" he asked in surprise.

"Why? Because I don't wish it," she replied, and resolutely shut the dog's-eared directory.

"You've lost the place!" he cried.

"Thank Heaven! And if you really want to do me a turn, take that cursed directory and burn it."

Quillian's astonishment lasted until the return of Hemmingay, who came back with a worried expression, and said:

"I'm sorry, my dear sir, but one of our patients has been taken suddenly worse. I've just telephoned for the doctor."

Quillian rose to his feet.

"There's no occasion for you to go," remarked Hemmingay.

"I couldn't think of staying," returned Quillian decidedly.

"If that's the case, take this, and this, and this," said Hemmingay, selecting odd documents from the littered

table. "They will give you the amplest details of the institution."

Quillian took the pamphlets, said 'Good-morning' to Vesper, whom he noticed did not raise her eyes at returning the salutation, and went into the hall accompanied by the Secretary.

Here, and for all the urgency of the sick patient's condition, he continued talking to Quillian; and somehow (the latter was too confused to notice how it came about) his attention was attracted to a box fastened to the wall and labelled:

'Visitor's box.'

Quillian dropped in a sovereign (Hemmingay pretended not to notice), shook hands with the Secretary, and left the house.

He had not gone very far before he found he had forgotten his stick and gloves.

He went back, hoping against hope that he would see more of Vesper (the name lingered on his tongue). On mounting the steps of the house he had recently quitted, he found the door open, and Hemmingay just inside, and in the act of abstracting Quillian's sovereign from an otherwise empty box.

CHAPTER XIII

THE "PRINCESS ROYAL"

"How are you getting on?"

"Extremely well."

"I thought so."

"Why?"

"You seemed different," said Sister Jane, who, to-day, had put on over her ordinary sober frock her attenuated Franciscan habit of brown, which signified she was a member of the Third Order of women affiliated to that Fraternity. This she would wear on her death-bed and in her grave, since it was commonly affirmed that such a garment would go a long way to assist the soul's salvation of one thus clad.

"In what way?" asked Quillian quickly.

"I don't know that I can explain. But I can see something has happened."

"It's only that I've come upon an opportunity of doing something definite."

"May I ask what it is?"

"Certainly," faltered Quillian.

"Well——"

"Would it interest you?"

"Very much."

"I'll tell you some time."

"Why not now?"

"You say Father Horan may be here any moment!"

"That may mean any time. This may be the only chance we may get."

Thus pressed, Quillian spoke of his secular leanings at the monastery, and of his desire to bear a part, either in awakening the dormant patriotism of his countrymen, or in the domain of social politics; also, of his present

difficulty in arriving at the truth in these matters, since the party newspapers, and those whose advice he had sought, had urged opinions that were violently opposed: then, with a self-consciousness that would not have deceived a sheep, he explained that the chance of doing the something tangible he had mentioned was owing to his meeting with Hemmingay of the Princess Royal Hospital, and of his having learned of its lack of funds.

Quillian did not once refer to Vesper.

"Is that all?" she asked, after he had done.

"I think so."

She gave him a quick, hard glance, and said:

"Hemmingay! I seem to know the name. Is he straight?"

"So far as I know."

"I suppose it never occurred to your innocent mind that he might be an adventurer."

"I'm going into the matter thoroughly. I'm going to the hospital this afternoon."

"And no one in the world could deceive such a sharp person as yourself!"

"We are all liable to err," returned Quillian.

"Some more; some less."

There was a silence, during which Quillian bridled an inclination to fidget; it was interrupted by Sister Jane, who suddenly asked:

"Is there a Miss Hemmingay?"

"Why do you ask?" he returned somewhat shamefacedly.

"I only wondered. I see there is."

"How?"

"What is she like?"

Quillian confusedly reflected, before replying:

"She would be hard to describe."

"Is she so charming?"

"She is certainly very remarkable-looking."

"Now I understand," said Sister Jane grimly.

"Understand what?"

"The—the good work the hospital is doing."

"You misjudge me—indeed you do," declared Quillian

with some heat. "I should be quite the last man in the world to be influenced by such a consideration."

"No doubt," smiled Sister Jane.

"Besides, anything of that sort would be quite impossible so far as I'm concerned."

"With an impressionable young man all things are possible."

"I don't, for one moment, suppose she would ever be the least interested in me."

Sister Jane was quick to notice the despondency in his voice; with something of an effort, she said:

"You would certainly be severely handicapped if you start by crying down yourself."

Before he could speak, she went on:

"Our sex is taken by the blustering, swaggering, bullying sort; and that only goes to prove what adorable creatures we are and——"

"I don't believe that for one moment," he interrupted. "Apart from all that, what you insinuate is quite out of the question."

"Because you are so foolish as to believe you are not good enough for her?"

Quillian shook his head.

"Well, what is it?" she persisted; upon his hesitating, she said:

"Surely you can tell me. I am not curious, as most women would be; I only want to smooth rough ways, and one with my experience of life, who is only anxious for your welfare and happiness, may be useful."

Quillian thanked her, and told her in somewhat round-about fashion of the nature of his engagement to Mercia Lownes.

"One question, and I have done," said Sister Jane upon the completion of his story: "Of course, you love Mercia?"

"Y-yes," he replied.

"You don't seem over certain about it."

"She is so good and noble minded, no one could help loving her. I am certain I do."

"If that's the case, I'll find out what I can about this Mr. Hemmingay. And you must let me advise you in other matters."

"You are very kind."

"Haven't you any man friend?"

Quillian told her of Tommy Chalfont.

"If he's Vancourt's younger son, he's not the kind of man I mean at all. I was wondering——"

"Yes," from Quillian as she paused.

"I was wondering if I should introduce you to a relation of mine. People say things about him, and he hasn't made the best use of his many gifts. But he would do a lot for me."

Before Quillian could agree or otherwise to this suggestion, Father Horan had entered his room, and the discussion came to an end.

Father Horan was tall, slight, and pale, and looked as if the next strong wind must blow out the wan flame of his life, which flickered up to burn luminously in his dark eyes; these were aglow with a cheery desire to bring light into the many shady places of his mission in the face of every conceivable discouragement; it was evident he was wearing himself out in his unequal tussle with poverty and ignorance.

He warmly greeted Quillian, and directly the priest touched his hand, it was as though Quillian were conscious of a human sympathy which was over and beyond that of the orthodox sentiment of an ecclesiastic for a member of his Church.

"How unfortunate I should have missed you. And how kind of you to help us as you have done, and come so far to see me!"

He went on talking, and in the manner of one who is living on his nerve force; he had not got very far, however, before Sister Jane insisted on his seating himself, and on not saying any more until she had brought him a glass of milk.

"I'm glad you have made friends with 'mother,'" laughed Father Horan upon being permitted to open his lips.

"Is that what she is to you?" replied Quillian.

"To all of us who are privileged to come under her wing. From all she has told me of you, I dare say she'll be trying to 'mother' you one of these days."

"I'm not sure she hasn't begun already," said Quillian.

"Take my advice, and don't have it. She's a terrible nuisance sometimes. I quite believe she would add the wearing of damp socks to the seven deadly sins."

"I would to such men as you," declared Sister Jane stoutly.

"No flattery," returned the priest lightly.

"It happens to be true in your case."

"Please don't," laughed Father Horan. "If you talk like that, it will make me ever so vain, and I shall be coming out in a new cassock."

"Isn't it about time you had one?" asked Sister Jane. "I've darned that, until I believe there's more darning than the original stuff."

"It's correct to wear darned clothes in Wapping, and I'm sure you wouldn't have me out of the fashion," replied Father Horan, before turning to Quillian and gently asking him about his doings since he had been in England.

"He hasn't told you anything about the hospital that's got hold of him," said Sister Jane presently.

"And what might that be?" asked Father Horan.

Quillian gave some sort of description of the place in question; after he had done, Father Horan asked of Sister Jane:

"And what is wrong with it, pray?"

"That I'm going to find out."

"Don't you listen to her," said Father Horan to Quillian. "She's jealous of other charities, and wants everything she can get for her soup-kitchens, boot and coal clubs, and goodness knows what."

"I'll see she wants for nothing," said Quillian.

The conversation, which then took a more serious turn, was chiefly conducted by the priest and Sister Jane, and consisted in the former relating the results of his morning's visits to his parishioners: he sought to make light of the ceaseless disappointments he received, but Quillian was not blind to an undercurrent of disillusion that almost amounted to hopelessness.

He had barely done, when a knock was heard on the door; upon whomsoever it might be being told to come

in, a tousled young woman, who was seventeen and looked thirty, entered to say that her father was knocking her mother about, and would Father Horan come at once, as he was the only man who could influence the wife-beater.

Although wellnigh exhausted with his morning's work, Father Horan promised to come with all despatch; Quillian offered to go with him, but was told his presence would do far more harm than good; he accompanied the priest to the door, made a hasty arrangement for the hearing of his confession, warmly shook his hand, and watched him hurry along the mean street with a flock of unkempt urchins, who evidently looked on him as their friend, at his heels.

"There went a good man," said Sister Jane upon Quillian's return to the room.

"I see that for myself."

"You feel it, don't you?"

"Undoubtedly."

"That is why I work for him as I do, and shall for so long as he lives."

"What do you mean?" asked Quillian quickly.

"He's killing himself as fast as he can. Before I met him and made up my mind to look after him, they say he lived on three pennyworth of brisket of beef on ordinary days, and five pennyworth on Feast days; and that to save money for the mission, he took a room near a street lamp, so he could read at night by this and economize the gas."

"Good heavens!"

"I can well believe it."

"Won't anything stop him from working so hard?"

"Nothing at all. I've talked to him for hours, but it's only so much wasted breath," said Sister Jane, to add in an undertone: "It's men like him who help one to believe."

Quillian regarded her curiously; not caring to intrude into the privacies of her thoughts, he said nothing, and presently she remarked:

"I suppose you are itching to pay your afternoon's visit to the hospital!"

"Why should you think that?"

"I'm not a fool."

"I was not aware that I was so very eager," said Quillian, and saying the thing that was not from a chivalrous desire to prevent Miss Hemmingay from being slightly spoken of.

"You are: you know you are. And I won't keep you," said Sister Jane as she rose to her feet.

"I'm in no hurry to go," he declared, and followed her example.

"That is what you say."

"But if I am keeping you from your work——"

"It's no use trying to deceive me," she laughed.

"And you should take three mothers and, at least, five chaperons."

"I'm quite capable of taking care of myself," he assured her, and not being disinclined to start on his long journey to Walham Green, he edged towards the door.

"What is her Christian name?" asked Sister Jane suddenly, and after looking at him much as she had done on their first meeting in the chapel.

"You know it is Mercia."

"I don't mean her."

"Oh! Vesper."

"Vesper! How do you know?"

"It's what her father called her."

"Anyway, I have your address," she said, and going off at a tangent. "Don't be surprised if I look you up one of these fine days."

"At my flat?" he asked in some surprise.

"Don't worry. I'm much too old to cause scandal," she said bitterly.

"Why do you speak like that?"

"No woman is particularly cheery at reaching the 'safe' age. Good-bye. I won't keep a fool from his folly any longer."

Quillian turned (he had been preceding her to the door), and her face looked both hard and tender.

Perhaps there was reproach in his eyes, for she said:

"Don't forget I'm 'mothering' you; or, if you prefer

it, 'sistering' you, as the heroine says in feeble plays when she refuses a man who hasn't enough money."

"You surprise me!" remarked Quillian.

"You're that much interested in me," she remarked musingly. "Why?"

"You seem the kindest woman alive, and sometimes, if I may say so, there is an undercurrent of bitterness."

"Thereby hangs a tale. Now, good-bye. And think of m—us here, should you ever get Mercia out of your mind."

Unaware that Sister Jane was watching him from the door, Quillian hastened to Wapping Station, striving the while to conceal from himself how much he was looking forward to his forthcoming meeting with Miss Hemmingay: when he could no longer hide from himself how alive was this anticipation, he told himself, and quite believed, his eagerness was caused by the wide gulf there was between her occupation and admissions.

He made a hasty luncheon at his flat (it was well past two), and after putting on with considerable care some of the smart clothes he had obtained at a fashionable tailor's in London, he set out for his destination.

He had not gone very far before he was sure it was later than it was, consequently, he took the first taxi-cab which came along, and was speedily without the shabby hospital, the steps of which he went up two at a time and with heart a-beat.

On this occasion, the door was speedily answered by a sullen-looking woman, who from the make of her apron, the *châtelaine* at her side, the cap, shaped like a culinary mould, upon her head, he took to be a common sort of nurse; at the same time, something about her had an indefinable suggestion of general servant.

"Mr. Hemmingay was in," he learned in reply to his inquiry, and on being ushered into the front-room, which he had to himself, he stared blankly at the chair Vesper had occupied during his last visit.

"She was not very far off," he assured himself, for the frowsy directory was open in front of the place where she had sat; there was a pile of addressed envelopes

by its side; and nearer inspection told him that the 'J' nib of the pen she had been using was yet wet with ink.

Apart from all these evidences of her recent presence, there was a subtle aroma of her personality in the air he breathed.

Two minutes later, his hand was warmly shaken by Reginald Stone Hemmingay, who said:

"Delighted you've come, my dear Quillian. Should have been ever so disappointed if you had not. Hope you are well."

"Quite, and you?" returned Quillian, who was impatiently wondering what had become of Vesper.

"So-so: so-so. But it would be a sad thing if you were not: youth; riches; brains; ideals!"

"They are much, but they are not everything."

"Because it is decreed that most of us are never satisfied."

"Who are the exceptions?"

"Those, if I may say so, who can congratulate themselves that they are practical philosophers."

"I once read somewhere that 'Philosophy is the essence of sour grapes.'"

"That must have been said by someone who was too small-minded to practise it."

They talked further commonplace, during which Quillian became more and more uneasy at Vesper's absence; he bore himself with what patience he might until he could no longer restrain himself.

"I hope Miss Hemmingay is well," he said, and anxiously awaited her father's reply.

"Quite."

"I hope she has not been working too hard."

"She has been at it all day," said Hemmingay, who, for all the carelessness of his speech, was narrowly eyeing the other.

"I hope she doesn't do too much," went on Quillian.

"Trust her father to see to that."

"Philosophers have a way of taking things as they come."

"Not when their own flesh and blood is concerned."

Quillian was minded to add: "And with such flesh and blood," but held his peace.

"Now, would you like to have a look round our hospital?" said Hemmingay briskly.

"By all means," returned Quillian, who hoped to come upon Vesper in his progress.

Hemmingay ostentatiously rang the bell; there was an astonishingly smart response in the person of the sullen-looking woman who had opened the door to Quillian.

"This is our head matron, Mrs. Hunt," said Hemmingay; before Quillian could say anything, the former added: "All ready, nurse?"

"Yes," she replied off-handedly.

"Then come along."

Instead of going up the shabbily carpeted stairs, as Quillian had expected, the head matron led the way along the passage by the staircase to a room at the back of the house which was meagrely (at least, so it seemed to Quillian) fitted up as a surgery: there were some three dozen quarter or so filled bottles on deal shelves; some lint, ointment pots, a bottle of carbolic acid, and a few medical appliances on a table; a chair bedstead, and two or three chairs which were in sad need of re-covering; and that was pretty well all.

"Surgery!" cried Hemmingay with a comprehensive wave of his arm, which was, doubtless, calculated to remove any doubts of its adequate equipment.

Mrs. Hunt opened a door in the farther end of the left-hand wall, and they all descended wooden steps, which were protected by an awning, to a portable iron building; this covered most of the garden that stretched its dreary length behind the house.

On entering this erection, Quillian discovered it was not by any means so large as he had expected by reason of the structure being partitioned for the respective uses of male and female patients.

There were eight beds in the part reserved for men, and five of these were tenanted: down the middle of the apartment ran a table laden with dishes of fruit and bowls of flowers.

"Men's Ward," remarked the Secretary, and as ostentatiously as before.

"How is your very serious case?" inquired Quillian in an undertone.

"Eh!" from Hemmingay in surprise.

"The patient who was in danger!"

"All our patients are more or less in danger."

"The one who was so ill on my first visit!"

"Oh—ah: yes. Wonderfully better, thanks to the nourishment and skilful treatment he received," said Hemmingay in an undertone.

Quillian, who would have liked to have said a few words of sympathy to the wan occupants of the beds, was hurried into the farther Ward; this was much as was the other (including the flowers and fruit), but that three of the beds were occupied by women, who followed the little group with big, suffering eyes.

If Quillian had looked to find Vesper in the 'Female Ward,' he was disappointed.

Once more it was as though there were objections to his lingering; he was conducted through yet another door to a bit of derelict garden behind the building; here, there were a wooden form, and one or two down-at-heel basket-seats.

"Our convalescents' garden," said Hemmingay.

"Not a very cheery prospect," Quillian could not help remarking.

"When one rises from a sick-bed, anything is a paradise," returned the Secretary, and as if he meant it.

They started to go back as they had come; and if the truth be told, Quillian was nothing loath, since he counted on running into Vesper somewhere or another; they had hardly reached the door separating the two Wards, when a woman's voice came from one of the beds:

"What about my medicine!"

Hemmingay indignantly turned.

"What about my medicine!" repeated the voice.

"It's been ordered," said Hemmingay sharply.

His hand had touched the door-handle, and another voice, this one with an angry touch of shrillness, said:

"What about my dressing?"

"It's been ordered," returned the Secretary as before.

Quillian was not certain, but he almost believed he caught the mutter of "I'm sure" from the woman who had spoken last.

Hemmingay assumed his most dignified manner, and hurried Quillian into the 'Male Ward'; the latter's ears caught a tittering from the room they had quitted.

"The poor are always ungrateful," said Hemmingay to Quillian in order to explain this unseemliness.

Quillian made no reply; perhaps to correct an unpleasant impression, Hemmingay stopped by the bed nearest to the door that communicated with the wooden steps.

"And how are you, my man?"

"Better, sir," replied the patient, who was a timid-looking man.

"Ah! I'm glad of that."

"No, 'ee ain't no better," said a surly voice from the next bed.

"I beg your pardon," icily from Hemmingay.

"'Ow can he be?"

"Isn't everything being done for him?"

"No, it ain't: or for me, or any of us."

"Scandalous!" cried Hemmingay.

"The doctor said Jim was to 'ave all sorts of coddling; an' me too; an' all of us blokes. Where is it, guv'nor?"

"It's been ordered," said Hemmingay shortly.

"Not 'arf," scornfully returned the other.

"I'll conduct my visitor to my office, and then I'll return and speak to you," declared Hemmingay.

"What did I tell you!" he said to Quillian, on being free of the 'Male Ward.' "The more you do for the poor, the more you may; and they think nothing's been done for them unless you pour into them quarts of evil-smelling, nasty-tasting drugs."

Quillian was conducted to the room on the left of the front-door, where he was left to kick his heels, and wonder what had become of Vesper: her father had returned to give a piece of his mind to the ungrateful patients.

While he was gone, Quillian gave scarcely a thought to the suspicions that might otherwise have arisen with

regard to the proper conduct of the hospital; he was worried by Vesper having failed to put in an appearance.

He could not keep still, and fell to pacing, first the room, and finding this not large enough for his movements, from the farther wall to the other side of the hall: it was in one of these progresses that he caught sight of Mrs. Hunt through the open door of the surgery; she was in the act of bringing up from the Wards (in one of which she had remained) the flowers and fruit which had decorated the tables.

Quillian stored this sorry incident in his mind for further consideration, and was forthwith sorely troubled by fearing that Vesper had gone out of doors on some errand, and that something untoward had befallen her, most probably in connection with a motor-bus or cab.

Then, in pacing from the room into the hall, he all but ran into Hemmingay, whose face was flushed with anger, doubtless from his recent upbraiding of the recalcitrant patients.

"Come inside, and sit down, my friend," he said with all the cordiality he could muster; having got Quillian into the room, he almost banged the door.

Forthwith he made detailed excuses for the ungracious complaints; finding that the other did not seem the least put out by what had happened, he speedily became his pompous, exuberant self.

"Upstairs, apart from the rooms we occupy, is a private nursing home. But I won't trouble you to see that to-day. And it is scarcely advisable: nerve cases and all that: need special rest as you can imagine."

Quillian could no longer contain himself.

"Perhaps that is where Miss Hemmingay is," he said.

"Bless my soul! I'd quite forgotten dear Vesper," cried her father, who was thankful for finding a subject that might divert the other's mind from what had occurred.

"I should not like to go without seeing her."

"And you shall not." Quillian knew a great relief. "I can't make out what's become of her. She was so looking forward to seeing you."

"Indeed!"

"Fact. Often spoke of you; said quite a lot, for her. And she was in this very room five minutes before you came."

"I hope nothing has happened."

"So do I, my dear Quillian; most profoundly. My right hand; inspiration and—and all the rest of it. You'll excuse a father's pride, but Vesper is a most unusual girl. Fit to take her place in any society."

"I can well believe it," assented Quillian.

"And the chances that girl has had of a brilliant marriage!" Quillian listened with all his ears. "But no. She prefers to stay on with her father and continue her good work."

This last statement was at issue with the girl's admission to Quillian upon his last visit; he looked with curious, if not critical, eyes at Hemmingay, and for a time the conversation languished.

"I have carefully read the papers you gave me," said Quillian in order to break an unusually long silence.

"Glad you didn't forget us."

"And if you would let me——" continued Quillian, and produced his cheque-book from his breast-pocket.

On catching sight of it, Hemmingay's shifty eyes widened; notwithstanding this evidence of gratification, he held his hand on high.

"Not?" from Quillian, who was greatly surprised at Hemmingay's refusal of his offer.

"Certainly not."

"But——"

"We are not like that, my dear Quillian. We do not come upon our friends, if Vesper and I may dare to call you that, so suddenly."

He said more in the same strain; Quillian had almost recovered from his astonishment, when the other said:

"If you wish to be generous, there is a scheme afoot, and in which I may be selected to have a voice, that will offer a magnificent opening for a young man inspired by the noblest ideals."

"Oh!"

"Vesper is more than interested in it."

"I should like to hear all about it."

Hemmingay again held up his hand.

"Mum's the word, for the present. But I promise you, you shall be the first to know about it; and if you *are* interested, I will give you an introduction to a Personage—a very considerable Personage—who is the life and soul of the matter."

Quillian expressed his thanks (his thoughts were more taken up with Vesper); and, presently, the other said:

"I was wondering if you would care to come and have a bit of dinner one night next week!"

Quillian jumped at the invitation.

"I should be delighted," he said.

"Just ourselves; and I'm sure Vesper would be ever so pleased. And perhaps I may have more to tell you then."

"You will let me know?"

"Vesper shall not fail."

Quillian waited and waited, but without seeing anything of Vesper; his anxiety increased at seeing that her father was genuinely uneasy at her long absence.

It was only the arrival of divers youngish women with collecting-boxes which, at last, persuaded him to go: youngish women with bold eyes (their faces were not innocent of paint and powder), who had been padding the City streets all day, and entering innumerable offices, where they had begged, coaxed, and wheedled men into parting with small coins for the upkeep of the hospital; and with a whole-hearted energy since they more or less got their living from the twenty per cent. they received of their takings.

Quillian sadly betook himself in the direction of his home; he was burdened with an unaccountable depression; mingled with this was an anxiety with regard to the thousand and one misfortunes that might have overtaken Vesper.

So cast down was he that, for some space of time, he failed to open a letter from Mercia which awaited him at the flat; a letter that was in somewhat belated reply to the two last he had sent.

CHAPTER XIV

AN EXPOSURE

"WHAT is it, Grumby?" asked Quillian impatiently.

"Letters, sir."

"Don't you see I'm busy?"

"Very sorry, sir," said Grumby, who made as if to retreat.

"Never mind: put them down somewhere. And—can you tie a tie?"

"Very sorry, sir, but that sort of thing never comes much in my way. Vestments is more in my line," returned Grumby, with a suspicion of reproach in his voice.

"That'll do. Get out; you fidget me," said Quillian irritably; he had the excuse that he had already crumpled three ties in his efforts to tie them neatly, and now nervously fingered the fourth.

By dint of almost superhuman patience, he contrived a fairly presentable bow; although by no means satisfied with his handiwork in face of what was toward (it was the evening he had eagerly accepted Miss Hemmingay's formal invitation to dinner, an invitation which had relieved his mind of his apprehensions regarding all that might have happened to her) he went on with his preparations, as it would never do to be late.

He carefully put on a smartly cut coat, and caught sight of the letters Grumby had brought and had left on a corner of a chest of drawers: a few moments later he looked through these; his experienced eye telling him which were begging appeals, he put these on one side and glanced at the one or two that were left.

One of these was from Sister Jane (he had already heard from her), and the gist of her four-paged letter was

that she sent by the same post the current number of *Truth*; and that this contained something about Hemmingay and the Princess Royal Hospital, which he should not fail to read.

Quillian undid and read the journal with trembling fingers; it was no hard job to find the matter referred to, for two pages were turned down and some half-dozen paragraphs were scored with blue pencil.

In the plain-spoken, racy style for which this periodical is justly famed, attention was called to a professional philanthropist, Reginald Stone Hemmingay by name, who batted on the generosity of the credulous, and whose present occupation was the conduct of the Princess Royal Hospital; and since a big fraction of the income, such as it was, was swallowed up by the salary of the Secretary, who was Hemmingay, it would seem that the institution was mostly run for his own purposes.

It went on to complain of the neglect with which patients were treated; and alleged that some had all but died from lack of nourishment; after declaring that the name of the hospital decorated *Truth's* black list, it strongly advised the charitably disposed to let it severely alone.

Bad as this was, there was more that made a specific appeal to Quillian.

It gave a summary of the various shady concerns with which Hemmingay had been mixed up; among these was a Society for the Conversion of Italian Roman Catholic Priests to Protestantism; this had existed in Malta, and depended for its support on contributions from the rabidly evangelical, whose name is legion.

It declared that the Society had received a large sum in alms; but that, for a period of three years, the 'College' had not contained a single convert; and that it was only the exposure of this scandal which put an end to its career.

There was more, but what Quillian had already read was more than enough for the present.

Although rubbing shoulders with a broad-minded world had done much to remove the more angular of his ecclesiastical prejudices, many of the habits of thought

consequent upon his monastic life had a firm grip of his mind: the allegations about the hospital he could overlook, indeed, he had already suspected that there was much that was not well with this institution; but the Maltese College, for the undermining of the faith of Italian priests, was quite another story.

He paced the room with nervous steps, and believed he would be more than justified, not only in breaking his engagement to dine, but in putting an end to his acquaintance with the Hemmingays.

The bias of his reflections was interwoven with thoughts of Vesper: he did not seek to conceal the great attraction she had for him; and told himself how well it was his heart was held for all time by the blameless Mercia, so there was not the remotest chance of its being offered to Miss Hemmingay.

His thoughts turned from the concrete to the abstract.

There was, also, no denying the power of love; and that in rare instances it over-rode every obstacle that lay in its path: but so far as he was concerned, he could not forget the cardinal reason why he had been freed from his vows by the Keeper of the Gates of Heaven; it was, therefore, a solemn obligation for him to fulfil the conditions to the letter, and wed a 'good Catholic wife.'

His hair almost stood on end at picturing the horror with which the good Guardian at Ypres, Father Akhurst, and even the rare natured Father Horan would receive the news that he wished to wed such an one as the daughter of the Secretary of the Maltese College.

Quillian was as one who has escaped a deadly peril; his breath came freely, and he was thankful (and at the back of his mind he was nothing of the kind) to Sister Jane for having been the means of removing the scales from his eyes, even to the length of regarding his friendship for Vesper in another light.

It was not long before he was almost entirely taken up with the latter.

Her words, allied to her downcast manner, had as good as told him that she loathed the hospital and all its works; and now the engaging qualities with which his

youthful imagination had endowed her, assured him she was an unwilling partner in her father's schemes.

Her's was a fine nature which, in spite of its noble leanings, was perforce conducted along many devious ways; and if, as of course she did, she shrank from any hint of pollution, it was surely the business of one who divined the drift of things to give a helping hand to hold her back from the slough of her father's shadiness.

On the other hand, Quillian's sacerdotal training urged him to avoid the suspicion of touching pitch; one moment he would willingly risk defilement in order to assist her: the next, he was withheld by the prejudices of the Church.

Again he was all concern for Vesper; and being in two minds, was swayed this way and that, until his hesitations regarding the dinner were resolved by Grumby coming to tell him that the cab that had been ordered was waiting without.

"It was too late to put them off," Quillian told himself; he scrambled into a silk-lined overcoat; put on his crush hat; and hastened downstairs in order not to give himself time for further cautious reflection: two minutes later, the cab was speeding in the direction of the Fulham Road.

The lower part of the house was gay with lights; upon the door being opened by Mrs. Hunt, whose dour face allowed itself to betray a slight surprise at Quillian's smart appearance, he feared he might have done amiss in dressing for dinner.

If he had, it was too late to undo matters, so after removing his outer things, he was conducted to a drawing-room on the first floor, where, before he had time to look about him and discover Vesper's influence in the arrangement of the room, the door opened and she appeared.

She wore evening dress; and although smart women might have picked holes in its material and design, Quillian thought it the most beautiful frock he had ever seen.

And as she advanced upon him in all the insolence of her youth and comeliness, he was quite taken aback by the alluring figure she made: he had never dared to believe she could look so fair and distinguished-looking.

This was his first impression; he had not been with her very long, however, before he suspected that her proud bearing masked an anxiety that was, doubtless, not unconnected with her father's exposure in the columns of *Truth*.

"You have come!" she began.

"Of course," he said, and conscious that her brilliant appearance had dissipated most, if not all, of the dubieties that had troubled him so far as she was concerned.

"I don't see why 'of course'!"

"What did you expect me to do?" he faltered.

"Some people change their minds at the last moment."

"Indeed!"

The confidence with which she had greeted him seemingly evaporated, for the stamina left her full, rich voice, and she sat on a chair and gazed listlessly, if not helplessly, before her.

He glanced at her wealth of carefully dressed hair which, to-night, had taken on a more brilliant hue; from that, to the whiteness of her neck, and said:

"In any case, I should be anxious to know that nothing had happened to you last Tuesday."

"Were you anxious?" she asked, and with no particular curiosity in her voice.

"Naturally."

"I came back almost directly after you left."

Quillian thought hardly of his luck on that particular day.

"And in any case," she went on, "you must have known I was all right by my writing to you as I did."

"Still——"

"Still what?"

Quillian hesitated to reply, and she said:

"Perhaps you think I avoided you?"

A subtle dread seized him.

"Did you?" he asked.

"Do you want me to tell you the truth?"

"If—it is the truth."

She glanced at him and appeared to hesitate.

"Well!" he said in as level a voice as he could command.

"I don't know: I don't know anything."

"But——"

"Here comes father, and a friend."

Hemmingay entered the room, and for all his cordiality, it was apparent to Quillian's quickened perceptions that he was being narrowly eyed by his host: the latter was accompanied by a rather good-looking young man who, after he had deferentially greeted Vesper (Quillian in the twinkling of an eye divined he was in love with her), was introduced to him by the name of Tompsett.

Mr. Tompsett was one of those lucky youths who take life seriously: he was a church-goer; Sunday-school teacher; and was Captain of a corps of church cadets: he had a profile (of which fact he was more than aware); a fine forehead; wavy fair hair; and a sonorous voice which he rather self-consciously employed: he earned his daily bread in the office of a shipping firm, of which his uncle was a director; had secret aspirations in the direction of the bar; and lived (he called it resided) at Earls Court.

"You two should be interested in each other," remarked Hemmingay. "Both of you have the desire to do all you can in the world."

"What about Miss Hemmingay and yourself?" said Tompsett, who evidently took the work of the hospital at its face value.

"Father has enough enthusiasm for both of us," declared Vesper, and not without a hint of bitterness.

"And where there's a will there's a way," said Tompsett sententiously.

"And practise makes perfect," added Vesper. "And a stitch in time save nine."

"Quite so," assented Tompsett, well pleased at what he believed was the appositeness of his remark, and blissfully unconscious that Vesper was sarcastic at his expense.

Then, Hemmingay set about tackling Quillian and going out of his way to be more than commonly agreeable to him, and so far as the latter was concerned, with the allegations of *Truth* insistentlly drumming on his brain, he found it a hard matter not to betray his antagonism.

Hemmingay looked at his watch, and glanced at his daughter.

"I can't help it if we're late," she said. "The patients come first."

She had hardly spoken before Mrs. Hunt, who, just now, looked more of a maid than a hospital matron, entered the room and announced that dinner was ready.

"Where is Spraggs?" asked Hemmingay with simulated surprise; before Mrs. Hunt could reply, he added: "Of course! How stupid of me! Went this afternoon to see a dying uncle."

Quillian took Vesper downstairs to the room at the back of the general office; although her fingers barely touched his arm, he was thrilled by the physical contact: he wished from the bottom of his heart that she was not the daughter of her father.

The meal was anything but a success: Hemmingay's artificial cordiality (he had moments of careworn abstraction) was damped by his susceptibility to Quillian's hostility, while Vesper behaved much as she had done on the occasion of her first meeting with the latter: she hardly ever spoke: rarely lifted her eyes from her plate; and carried herself as might a brilliant automaton.

The presence of Tompsett alone kept things going, for he loved the sound of his voice, and uttered rolling commonplace, largely with an eye to impressing Vesper; even Quillian could see (it gave him an unholy delight) that the other guest piped in vain, and was regarded with the barest toleration.

Soup had been followed by fish, and Hemmingay was carving a saddle of mutton, when Mrs. Hunt, who had left the room in answer to a ring at the bell, returned with an anxious face and said in an undertone, that was overheard by Quillian, to the Secretary:

"The coal has come."

"What of it?"

"He wants the money."

"I'll send a cheque to-morrow."

"I told him that."

"Well—well!" from Hemmingay impatiently.

"They won't leave it without."

"Tell him to take it back."

"There's next to no coal in the place."

"Dear, dear! Such an inconvenient time to leave it. How much is it?"

"Four pounds."

"Dear! dear! I've nothing on me, and I used my last cheque to-day."

Mrs. Hunt shrugged her shoulders and looked troubled.

Quillian glanced at Vesper, and for all that her head was bent low on her plate, he saw that the blood had mounted to her face and neck; the next moment, he said to Hemmingay:

"Can I do anything for you?"

"Eh! So very sorry to trouble you; but if—if you have a matter of four pounds upon you, I wish you would let me have it until to-morrow."

Quillian produced the money and gave it to Mrs. Hunt, who forthwith left the room; upon his again looking at Vesper, he perceived she had put down her knife and fork, and that her head was bent even lower over her plate.

Quillian's forethought did much to restore Hemmingay's gaiety; he made one or two jokes, and presently rallied Vesper upon her depression.

"I'm ever so happy," she said.

"Shouldn't have thought it, my dear."

"Genuine happiness is rarely demonstrative," she sneered.

Tompsett, who was insensible to anything other than the impression he flattered himself he was making on Vesper, and in a lesser degree on Quillian, spoke of the way in which the authorities were taking proceedings against professional fortune-tellers and clairvoyants.

"Quite right too," declared Hemmingay with considerable heat. "Perfectly scandalous the way they prey on a confiding public."

"Isn't it!" said Vesper.

"And if the public can't protect themselves, it's time someone looked after them, eh, Quillian?"

"I'm with you there."

"Delighted that a man of your perception sees eye to eye with me on such an important matter," continued

Hemmingay, who, momentarily carried away by the reaction from the distresses attending the settling of the coal bill, said:

“And that’s where the Press has such an immense power of good. They expose the charlatan; the humbug; the——”

Here, he caught a cold glance from Vesper; seeing his own unhappy situation, he stopped short; coughed without reason, and made a valiant effort to get away from the subject without appearing to.

“Hah! Speaking of foretelling the future, and all that kind of thing, do you remember when you were a girl of fifteen and had your hand told by a palmist?”

“Did I?” she remarked off-handedly.

“I’ve not forgotten if you have. All these things are treasured in a father’s heart. It was at a bazaar, and Vesper came out of the palmist’s tent in a flood of tears; and for why, think you?”

“I suppose they frightened her with their rubbish,” replied Quillian.

“Because the palmist told her she would marry; but would never have any children.”

Hemmingay laughed, apparently at Vesper’s expense; but Quillian was silent and very grave: he was seeking to appraise the something that had stirred his heart at learning of what was to him her exquisite humanity.

Much that was elemental was awakened; for some time, he feared to so much as glance at her, although he longed to do so: upon his looking at her as he presently did, she was seemingly moved by a like impulse: their eyes met, and he saw that hers were wet.

CHAPTER XV

VESPER UNBENDS

IF Quillian had expected that this evidence of womanliness would thaw the reserve with which Vesper had surrounded herself, he was mistaken: she retired even more into her shell, if this were possible, and repulsed any attempt he might make to draw her out.

Once more Tompsett unknowingly came to the rescue of the depression set up by her aloofness, a depression that was unaccountably deepened where Quillian was concerned.

"Is that ball going to take place?" asked Tompsett of Hemmingay.

"Eh!" from the latter.

"For the funds of the hospital?"

"Oh—ah! Yes. I think so."

"I gather it's under very distinguished patronage!"

"Of course."

"And, of course, Miss Hemmingay will be present!"

"Naturally," said Hemmingay. "Vesper loves dancing."

"It's an event I shall look forward to with the greatest interest," returned Tompsett, who thereupon gazed fatuously at Vesper.

A little later, he asked of Hemmingay:

"May I ask if you are any further with your great scheme?"

"Things are quiescent for the moment," returned the man addressed.

"I am sorry to hear that."

"But only for the moment. I have every confidence in things moving quickly shortly."

"I am sure Miss Hemmingay will be deeply interested

in its furtherance," rolled Tompsett, and looking hard at Vesper.

"Very," she said absently; Quillian wondered what this further scheme of Hemmingay's might be, and whether it was one that would sooner or later be pilloried in *Truth*.

Five minutes later, Vesper rising to withdraw, Quillian opened the door: he glanced after her as she ascended the stairs; and it seemed to him that, unaware of the fact of being seen, she discarded much of her cold self-possession, and went as one whose soul was pierced by the iron of life.

Quillian returned to his seat and was surprised at seeing Tompsett prepare to leave the table and follow Vesper.

"Doesn't smoke, and can't stand the smell of it," explained Hemmingay.

"We needn't smoke," said Quillian, who felt that by joining Vesper at once Tompsett was seizing a mean advantage.

"Sit down and have some port wine. I shall be disappointed if we don't have our usual chat."

Quillian did as he was bid, and Hemmingay produced some admirable port wine, saying as he did so:

"You needn't be frightened to swallow this, my dear friend. Sent me by a thoughtful friend," a remark that made Quillian half suspect that the wine might have been given for hospital purposes.

Then he was ashamed of thinking this evil of his host (or rather of Vesper's father) without authority, and prepared to listen to what Hemmingay had to say.

But not for long: the influence of the four glasses the other pressed him to take, together with the curious new emotion which had welled in his heart since he had learned of Vesper's distress at the palmist's forecast, irresistibly urged him to behave with meticulous honesty where she was concerned: and at the back of his mind there was a like desire, though not so insistent, with respect to Mercia.

He was moved, and in spite of a singular distaste for the making of the admission, to tell of his engagement to Mercia.

Hemmingay, who had been talking about any and everything, interrupted his thoughts and said:

"Now, you'll have a cigar."

"Is there time?"

"Tompsett will keep Vesper amused."

Quillian's face hardened; the other went on:

"Tompsett greatly admires her, as I dare say you saw. Case of love at first sight."

"Oh!"

"But quite hopeless so far as she's concerned."

"Why?" asked Quillian quickly.

"Vesper is very romantic."

"Is she?"

"She will only marry for love, and she doesn't care for Tompsett," declared Hemmingay, and added significantly: "She never mentions him in his absence."

To cover a slight confusion, that was assisted by prickings of conscience with regard to his engagement, Quillian said the first thing that came to mind.

"What is this new scheme of yours?"

"You would like to know?"

"Naturally."

Hemmingay forthwith launched into a description of a project, to which Quillian gave more or less heed (his thoughts were upstairs), to establish an association, not only for effectually curbing the perennial activities of the White Slave Traffic, but for providing a Home (Hemmingay was careful to say this was to be under ecclesiastical direction) for those who had been rescued from its clutches.

He also stated at some length it was not his idea; and that he was only indirectly interested, since it had been fathered by some of the great ones of the earth (Hemmingay's expression), among whom was a certain Lord Tayne, to whom he was anxious to give Quillian an introduction.

"What purpose should I serve?" asked Quillian in all humility.

"Eh! Tayne is a philanthropist; so are you: doesn't it follow you would like to meet; and that being so, it surely follows I should like to bring you together!"

"But I thought you told Tompsett it was hanging fire!"

"That is certainly the case," returned Hemmingay impressively. "And before I take a conspicuous hand in it, I shall be compelled to fight an action for libel."

"Indeed!" said Quillian, whose opinion of the other sharply rose.

"Ever read a paper called *Truth*?"

"Sometimes."

"I don't suppose you happened to see this week's?"

"As a matter of fact I did."

"Eh! Then you saw——"

Quillian nodded assent.

"Ah! Then I won't show it to you as I had er—intended. A gross libel: a foul slander: damnable calumny! But it will be called to account before a British judge and jury—special jury—and be made to pay dearly for its lies."

He indulged in sound and fury which Quillian tried to believe was honest until his thoughts were again taken up with the necessity of making known his engagement: he wondered if an opportunity would arise.

Vesper's name fell on his ear; her father was saying how it was necessary to impeach *Truth* for her sake.

"Quite so," assented Quillian with conviction.

"Wonderful the attention that girl attracts: one can't go out into the street without everyone looking at her."

"I can well believe it."

Hemmingay glanced sharply at his guest, and went on:

"I suppose I shall lose her in the nature of things; but till I do, it is all a great responsibility."

Quillian was uneasily silent; he stared at his glass, and the other continued:

"And she is so wilful, it makes me quite nervous if any man pays her the least attention. I shall not breathe freely until I see her married to some good and honourable man who is worthy of her."

"No doubt," said Quillian in a voice that seemed to come from a long way off.

"And the worst of it is—I don't mind telling you this—the kind of man I mentioned is not easy to find; and so

it comes hard on one of her guileless, susceptible nature if she is attracted by a good but interesting man who has no serious intentions."

Quillian did not stop to think if these remarks had a personal application: he was nerving himself for saying what his passionate anxiety to deal scrupulously with Vesper urged.

"Isn't that so?" asked Hemmingay.

"You are far more of an authority on the world and its ways than I."

"But you, at least, admit that my Vesper is a girl who would appeal to a man?"

"I more than admit it; more, I——"

"Yes, my dear Quillian?" almost cooed Hemmingay.

Quillian gave his native honesty rein.

"I can imagine a man, whomsoever he might be, gladly devoting his life to her if he had the ghost of a chance."

"You surprise me, my dear Quillian!"

"But—but—for all my admiration" (Quillian's breath came in quick gasps; "the cigar was unusually strong," he told himself) "of Miss Hemmingay, I could never be accused of paying attentions I did not mean, for I—I am practically engaged to be married."

"You—you are?" cried the other in a hollow surprise. "I must tell Vesper the good news at once: that is, directly we get upstairs. She will be delighted."

"Indeed!"

"She is so interested—of course in a friendly way—in you."

Quillian became strangely silent; he seemed bereft of all sense of feeling, which all but precluded him from noticing the dismal efforts Hemmingay made to appear gratified by the other's news.

This did not last very long, however, for soon he, also, became self-absorbed: his cigar went out; the lines in his face became deeper; his eyes held a worried look.

"Shall—shall we go upstairs?" he asked.

Quillian assenting, they rose from the table and went into the hall.

There was a pile of correspondence awaiting Hemmingay's attention (a lot of it was in blue envelopes

marked 'immediate'), but one addressed in an imposing hand caught his eye.

"Excuse me," he said, and tearing it open, rapidly glanced at the contents.

Quillian's ear caught a heartfelt sigh; the next moment the other grasped his arm, and said in a voice that had recovered its normal cheerfulness:

"Come along, my boy."

"Have you heard good news?"

"I should think I had!" returned Hemmingay, who carefully put the letter he had opened in his pocket.

"I'm glad."

"Thank you. Yes; the Lord certainly 'tempers the wind for the shorn lamb'—or, in this case, for the old ram."

They entered the drawing-room, where Vesper half reclined in a big chair and looked very bored, a condition of mind for which the attentions of Mr. Tompsett were doubtless responsible; she glanced at Quillian and, for a moment, her eyes lit with welcome before taking on their previous dull expression.

"Hope you don't think we've neglected you," began Hemmingay. "But we'd a lot to discuss."

"I've been having a splendid time," returned Vesper, whereupon Mr. Tompsett looked gratefully at the girl.

"And I've most interesting news," went on Hemmingay, and Quillian fully expected the former was about to reveal the contents of the letter that had raised him from the depths of an ill-concealed despair.

"What is it?" she asked, and without betraying the least interest.

"Our friend Quillian is engaged to be married," said Hemmingay; turning to Quillian, he asked: "You have no objection to my mentioning it?"

"N-no," he faltered, and glanced somewhat furtively at Vesper.

She looked at him with unfathomable eyes; and it seemed to Quillian's tense understanding a long time before she said:

"I suppose I must congratulate you."

He fought hard to reply; was aware of acute mental

discomfort; and loyally glued his thoughts to Mercia, and as she had last appeared to him.

Unhappily for the comparative peace of mind he sought to attain, he saw Mercia with her characteristic smile upon her face; this vision persisted in filling his imagination until he was irritable with himself, and for no reason at all that he could see.

The next thing he was aware of was that Mr. Tompsett had gone (he lived with an aunt who expected him to be in well before ten, explained Hemmingay) and that Vesper had seated herself beside him.

"Look after Quillian for a few moments. I must just go through the wards with the matron," said Hemmingay, before quitting the room, and leaving the two to themselves.

"Well!" said Vesper in a voice that startled Quillian from his brooding and concentrated all his attention on the speaker.

Much to his astonishment, and not a little to his annoyance, he perceived she had thrown off her dejection as she might a garment: her eyes were bright; colour came into her cheeks; and a playful animation endowed her with a fairness she had never exhibited before.

"Well!" he returned, and in none too cheerful voice.

"At least there is one happy person in the world!"

He was so perplexed by her lightning change of mood, that he replied:

"Who?"

"You, of course. Although I can't say you look wonderfully cheerful about it." Upon his failing to reply, she added: "Or is it a case of when one's engaged one's troubles begin?"

Quillian was minded to explain that he was not exactly engaged in the ordinary acceptance of the word; before he could so much as make a start, she asked:

"May I ask where you met her?"

"In the country. She is a Miss Lownes."

"The country! I know the type. Low church and high bodices!"

"On the contrary, she is of my Faith," returned Quillian simply.

"I am so sorry. Really I am," she said quickly.
"Am I forgiven?"

"Of course."

"Sure?"

"Ever so sure," he replied, and with an inflection of surprise in his voice.

She did not fail to notice this, for she said:

"I don't want to jar upon your happiness by saying tactless things."

"Thank you."

"That isn't the reason at all. I don't suppose we shall see much more of each other; and if you ever think of me at all, as you sometimes may, I want you to think of me ever so nicely."

"There is no doubt of that," he declared, and with a world of meaning in his voice.

"That is very sweet of you!"

Quillian's native humility prompted him to ask why.

"You know what life is—you very soon will if you don't now—one's constantly 'bumping up' against new people; and those you li—you're by way of liking—you very soon lose sight of; while those who almost drive you to madness become your very shadow."

"I don't see why I should lose sight of you," said Quillian, who was conscious of a tightening of his heart-strings.

"I don't see why you shouldn't—particularly now."

"There is this new scheme of your father's—I——"

"Well——" she said: her face had fallen at mention of this, and constrained him to silence.

"If you would let me, I should like to help."

An expression akin to fear came into her eyes.

"Substantially," he went on.

With something of an effort, she seemed to recover her spirits, and said:

"Anyway, we won't talk of that to-night. This is to be an evening of rejoicing."

"Rejoicing!" he echoed absently: the events of the last few hours, together with her arresting alteration of mood, had muddled his wits.

"Isn't your future happiness assured?"

"I—I hope so."

"You don't seem over certain about it! Perhaps, because you are so learned, you don't think very much of us in your heart!"

"On the contrary, I deeply reverence your sex," he returned in all sincerity.

Vesper laughed lightly.

"That way trouble lies!" she said.

"Trouble?"

"With a capital 'T.' Idols have a rotten knack of tumbling from pedestals; or cracking and showing what rubbish they're stuffed with."

The girl's flippant delight at hearing of his engagement stabbed his sensibilities and deepened the depression that, for no reason at all that he could see, had seized him in its grip.

"Besides, I'm not so sure we like to be worshipped so humbly," she went on.

"Why not?"

"It's a bit of an effort to live up to an ideal."

"Why do so, if one doesn't wish to?"

"That's where our bottomless vanity comes in."

Quillian was lost in a very mental slough of despond.

"If I were a man, I shouldn't be such a fool as to marry," she continued.

"Not!" he forced himself to say.

"I know too much about women."

"But——"

"Have you ever noticed—I don't suppose you have—" she interrupted, "that the average man is better than he makes out, while a woman is always worse than she appears!"

"I—I don't think I have," he faltered, and barely conscious of what he was saying.

"Anyway, she is—woman, I mean. And I suppose it's because men know so little of them that they think so highly of them—and——"

She suddenly broke off: he looked sharply at her, and she said in a low, appealing voice which stirred him to the depths:

"Forgive me!"

"Why?" he asked quickly.

"I'm a pig to 'crab' your happiness like that. I assure you it's all 'sour grapes.'"

"How do you mean?"

"Don't I envy you both from the bottom of my heart!"

"But—but——"

"Those who love are the princes and princesses of this world, you know. I'd no right to be such a beast!"

"Were you? I can't see that you were!"

She ignored his question, and turning to him said in all seriousness:

"You're a good man; and one any decent woman should respect, and do her very best to make happy. I very, very sincerely wish you every bit of the happiness you deserve."

Quillian tried to speak; his tongue refused its office: he sought to convey his heartfelt appreciation of what she had said with his eyes; and they remained in a sadly sweet silence until Hemmingay came back.

Vesper's hand lingered in Quillian's (and once more he thrilled at the physical contact) upon his saying 'Good-night;' and her good wishes buzzed in his brain during the somewhat long walk he, of set purpose, took to his flat.

In crossing the Buckingham Palace Road, he had to avoid a cab; in so doing, he was all but certain he caught a glimpse of Tommy Chalfont (whom he had not seen for some days) and Miss Fothergill within.

CHAPTER XVI

THE UNEXPECTED

"MY DEAR PAUL,

"I have not replied to your last two letters as there has been so much to do at the mission, and one way and another it has kept me very busy. There has also been much going on at home. The Philbricks came over to dinner last Tuesday; Sir Percy asked repeatedly after you.

"I much regret to say mother has not been anything like herself: she finds fault for no reason at all, and sometimes says things that would seem bitter if one cared to take them that way, which, of course, I do not. I am rather troubled on her account, as it all seems so thoroughly unlike her.

"The last few days I have been unable to get out very much owing to the change in the weather; it seems a pity after being so fine. Perhaps it will again change for the better shortly."

There were pages more of the same kind of thing; the only variation was at the end where Mercia told Quillian she always remembered him in her prayers and devoutly hoped he did likewise by her.

He quickly scanned its commonplaces before reading a letter from Hemmingay enclosing a fulsome introduction to Lord Tayne for Quillian.

The latter was about to acknowledge it, and, perhaps, write to Lord Tayne before going out (it was in the early morning and after a barely tasted breakfast), but on sitting down to write, Quillian toyed idly with his pen: he was in no mood to indite letters; to go out; to do anything; moreover he could not at all account for his listlessness.

More than once he asked himself if he were in want of a change, to reject scornfully the suggestion: London irked him, and, at the same time, he could not bear the thought of tearing himself away: he did not know what he wanted; and with the pen still between his fingers, and with notepaper and envelopes before him, he fell into a reverie, a reverie that was infrequently punctuated by sighs.

The last two weeks or so, indeed, ever since his evening with the Hemmingays, Quillian had known a curious distaste of life; this was in such violent contrast to his aforetime zest for his new existence that the alteration in his relation to things troubled him not a little.

His early training, and the discipline at Ypres, had implanted the practise of self-examination; it was, therefore, no hard matter to seek to discover the disturbing factor.

Although this mental process was many times repeated, and often in the silent watches of the night (Quillian no longer slept like a top), he was not honest with himself, and slurred over certain influences—perhaps, a certain influence—which might have given him an inkling with regard to what was toward.

He was aware in his heart of hearts of this evasion; was angry with himself for his lack of plain dealing; promised amendment he never performed; and was at issue with himself and all the world.

The only harbour of refuge, and not a particularly safe one at that, for the barque of his unquiet thoughts was his love for Mercia; he told himself, and tried hard to believe it, that directly they were man and wife all would be well.

Before this consummation could be his, however, he must first fulfil his promise of accomplishing something worthy in order to be seemly for such a mate: perhaps this was why he was ready, if not eager, to throw himself body and soul into the new scheme of Hemmingay's which was more or less afoot.

It was as good as any other that might come along, he told himself; was anxious to do all he might as speedily as possible so that by soon wedding Mercia he could win the ease of mind of which he was in sore need.

Doubtless it was his eagerness to put his shoulder to the philanthropic wheel which was responsible for the frequency with which he bent his steps in the direction of the Fulham Road, where he paid long visits to the down-at-heel hospital.

And should Vesper enter his thoughts, as she had a ready knack of doing if he were away from her, he was burdened with a depression that made him question if, like others he had met, soul sickness—the ‘Acedia’ of the Guardian at Ypres and the Early Fathers—had taken possession of him; and told himself that, if this were so, he was indeed in evil case.

Grumby’s voice interrupted Quillian’s melancholy.

“What is it, Grumby?” he asked irritably.

“Beg pardon, sir, if you’re busy,” said Grumby, and made as if he would leave the room.

“I’m busy; but not very. You needn’t go,” said Quillian, who, if the truth were told, was thankful to get away from his reflections by having someone to talk to.

Grumby, who was nearly always afflicted with nerves in his master’s presence, appeared to be collecting scattered wits.

“You don’t seem very happy” (he nearly said “either”), “Grumby!” remarked Quillian kindly.

“Well, sir, life isn’t what it was,” sighed Grumby.

“What do you mean?” asked Quillian quickly: perhaps even this old derelict might furnish some sort of explanation of his discontents.

“Well, sir, things aren’t what they were. I do miss the old underground railway.”

“In what way?”

“The smell of it. I loved the smell of the engines and the steam.”

“Indeed!”

“It used to remind me of the good old days of Protestant persecution, an’ martyrs burning at the stake; the scent of the underground always reminded me of how they must have sizzled.”

Quillian smiled wanly: Grumby went on:

“And the ignorance of people! Would you believe, sir, that when I mentioned to Mrs. Gassmann the Papal

Bull, 'Unigenitus,' she asked me if it won a prize at the Islington Cattle Show!"

"I can well believe it," smiled Quillian.

"And she isn't the only one. I went into a 'public' one night to pay my club money—otherwise I shouldn't have gone—and as I had the indulgence of a small ginger-beer, I happened to mention to the young person behind the bar that folks had seen in me a likeness to St. Thomas Aquinas. She'd never heard of him."

"That wouldn't have surprised me," returned Quillian, who shortly noticed that Grumby was staring blankly at him.

"What is it now, Grumby?"

"If I haven't clean forgot, sir!"

"What!"

"You're wanted on the telephone downstairs."

"Who by?" asked Quillian sharply.

"A lady, sir. She gave the name of Miss——"

By the time Grumby had finished what he had to say, Quillian was well on his way to the telephone box.

"Who is it? Are you still there?" he asked breathlessly, as he took the receiver in his hand.

"What a time you've been! I was just giving you up."

"I am so sorry. If you knew how sorry I am——"

"What were you doing?" interrupted Vesper's voice.

"My man muddled things. I shall have to get rid of him. How are you?"

"Awfully well. And you?"

"Sure?"

"Quite: and you?"

"The same as usual."

"Are you very busy?"

"Do you want me to come and help with your letters?"

"Not to-day: you've been so good lately. I want you to take me out."

"You want me to——"

"Do you very much mind?"

"What a question!"

"It seems like being fine. If you really feel like it, meet me as soon as you can."

"At your house?"

"Yes—no. Are you there?"

"Yes."

"Meet me at Charing Cross Station in three-quarters of an hour from now: will you?"

"Of course."

"There's a good boy. Good-bye."

Quillian, who was so excited at the prospect of spending a whole day with Vesper that he scarce knew what he was at, quickly changed into his smartest tweeds, before setting out for the appointed place in a taxi-cab, the driver of which, stimulated by the promise of a double fare, ran the risk of prosecution for exceeding the speed limit.

On reaching the tube station, Quillian jumped out; although he had some minutes to spare, he was seized by a fear that Vesper would not come.

His apprehensions increased with the passing of the seconds; upon the time she had given arriving, and there being no sign of her gracious presence, he could scarce contain himself for anxiety.

Two minutes later, he was as one possessed: one moment, he believed she had changed her mind; the next, he was certain that he had misunderstood the place they were to meet, and that she was awaiting him elsewhere.

Then he recollected there were two Charing Cross Stations; and perhaps she was at the other: he was about to set off as fast as his legs would carry him when it occurred to him that she may have meant this station after all, and might arrive during his absence.

This possibility no sooner flashed into his mind than he hit upon a solution of the problem with which he was faced: he would pay an intelligent-looking newsboy to look out for her, and, if he saw her, to tell her where he had gone.

Slipping the first coin which came to hand (it was half a sovereign) into a likely boy's hand, Quillian told him what he should do.

"'Ow shall I know 'er, guvnor?" asked the boy.

"She's tall and fair and——"

"So are lots o' ladies, sir."

"You'll know her right enough; she's the most beautiful girl in London," said Quillian, who scarcely knew what he was saying.

He sped up Villiers Street, leaving the astonished newsboy staring at the bit of gold in amazement, before biting it to see if it were genuine; unmindful of those he thrust aside in his heated progress, Quillian looked anxiously about the big station.

Nothing was to be seen of Vesper, so he returned to whence he had come in a great suspense and with heart a-beat.

Directly he caught sight of the newsboy, however, he saw by the lad's beaming face that the latter had earned his tip.

"Got her first time, guvnor; waiting f'you in the station," cried the boy. "An' here she is, sir."

A fat, blowsy, overdressed, raddled woman, who was all leers and smiles, and who looked like a depraved old cat, advanced on Quillian, who could not speak for anger.

"Ain't she a stunner! Ain't she a beauty! Look at 'er joolry! An' don't she just 'um with scent!"

Quillian was enveloped in a revolting perfume (it was patchouli), and a horrible voice said in his ear:

"Mornin', dearie!"

He sought to escape, and she clung to his arm; fearing a scene, he was about to expostulate with her, when he was bitterly alive to the fact that Vesper stood before him: for all his delight at seeing her safe and sound, he wished the pavement would open and swallow him up.

She glanced at the newsboy; the woman; the scared face of Quillian; and took in the situation at a glance: as for Quillian, he wrenched his arm from the detaining hand, joined Vesper, and said in a husky voice:

"Come away, that is if—if you can overlook this—this——"

"I don't think I can," she interrupted with mock gravity.

"But——"

"I'm two minutes late, and you must go and talk to another girl. Just like a man!"

"If you would let me explain, perhaps you might find

it in your heart to forgive me. There are two Charing Cross Stations, and I paid that confounded newsboy——”

“I quite understand. But how did you describe me?”

“I told him——”

“Yes, yes.”

“To look out for the—the most beautiful girl in London.”

“You did?”

“I did.”

“Then you’re forgiven.”

“You’ll really overlook it!”

“Overlook it! It was ever so funny!”

Quillian’s fine susceptibilities were somewhat jarred by this humorous point of view: he would almost have preferred her to have been offended: but the sun was now shining in a faultless sky, and Vesper was beside him, and looking delicious in a blue linen coat and skirt, and a hat of the same colour decorated with a red riband.

He shyly glanced at her; and he saw she was doing the same by him.

“It was sweet of you to come!” she said.

“Don’t say that—it’s—it’s——”

“But it was: and one likes to be truthful sometimes. How long can you spare?”

“What do you mean?”

“I want you to take me somewhere, if it won’t bore you. Somewhere where there are trees and quiet. Will you?”

If he had thought twice of falling in with her request, the winning smile she gave him would have scattered his hesitation; as it was, he was burning to do everything and more than she wished to give her the least pleasure.

“Where shall we go?” he asked in a voice he strove to make free of the emotion that welled within him.

“Do you know Richmond Park? I see by your face you don’t. You shall take me there; and that means I’ll take you.”

“We’ll take that cab,” suggested Quillian.

“We’ll go by train and tram if you don’t mind.”

“But——”

“Let me have my simple pleasure in my own way.

I don't suppose I shall have many more; and going as I wish, and with whom I wish, is all part of it."

So long as Vesper was by his side, Quillian, in his present mood, would have been more than content to crawl on his hands and knees if she had wished; they set out with a light heart.

"Take tickets to Hammersmith, and we'll take the tram from there," she said.

"What about your father?" said Quillian as they were descending to the platform.

"What about him!" she returned indifferently.

"Won't he mind?"

"Don't you know me well enough to know that in things I have set my heart on I please myself!"

"I almost begin to think so."

"Women who don't are fools—and so are men for that matter."

"That sounds dreadfully wicked," laughed Quillian.

"Then there's a chance of our enjoying ourselves."

"You've taken first class!" she said on his piloting her into the train.

"Naturally."

"Extravagance!"

"Is it?"

"Since you've done it, it doesn't matter. But just for once, I want to feel a happy irresponsible tripper."

They joked and talked like two happy children who were enjoying an unexpected treat; and they were both astonished at reaching Hammersmith almost as soon as they had started.

Leaving the station, they clambered on a tram that would take them to Kew Bridge, and for a time Quillian marvelled at the alteration that had occurred in Vesper: she had completely thrown off her listlessness and laughed and joked without ceasing, until, at last, even the ordinarily grave Quillian was almost at one with her mood.

"Do be careful!" she said upon his laughing outright at one of her more audacious sallies.

"Why?"

"You'll shock the conductor and get us turned off as undesirables."

It was on Quillian's tongue to reply that "he did not care one whit what happened so long as he was with her;" uncertain how she might take such a remark, he bridled his tongue.

On reaching Kew, the tide was in flood; seeing this, Vesper said:

"Can you walk?"

"I think so."

"Then we'll walk on the towpath to Richmond. It's quite nice at high tide. But, sometimes, the towpath gets flooded; and if it does you'll have to carry me."

"You're too heavy."

"Then I'd carry you."

On descending the steps to reach the tow-path, they came upon a sweet-stall, where Vesper stopped and surveyed the many-coloured wares.

"Will you buy me some sweets?" she asked with her magical smile.

"But——"

"Bull's-eyes, please. A penn'orth."

Quillian did as he was bid, and almost bought up the stock.

"You'll have to carry them," she said as they came away. "It's a punishment for hesitating to get them."

"I hesitated because they were not good enough for you."

"Far too good," she murmured almost to herself.

"What did you say?" he asked sharply.

"That it's all in the day—our day. And if you'd stood out, I believe at the risk of my life I'd have had a penny lick at that ice-cream stall, and made you do the same."

The tall, ascetic-looking man and the shapely girl walked the tow-path in the direction of Richmond; and so far as Quillian was concerned, the sunlight had never seemed so glad or had shone on such a gay scene as the river presented: his distaste for life was as if it had never been; and at Vesper's request he followed her example in sucking bull's-eyes.

Only once did his conscience prick him for any conceivable infidelity to Mercia which might be read into this

outing, and that when they were seated on a wooden bench almost facing Zion House: he wondered if she would be annoyed if she could know of what he was doing, or whether she would understand he was merely moved by a friendly interest in his companion.

Vesper's voice interrupted his thoughts and sharply recalled him from his somewhat meagre doubtings.

"You are a dear!" she said.

"Why?"

"Taking me out like this. No 'Yes, buts,' and all that sort of thing; but you at once did as I wished, and in the way I wished."

"Of course."

"You don't know what it means to me," she went on.

"It's done me good, too."

"And I'm going to forget everything unpleasant, and am going to enjoy myself. And I want you to do the same. It's going to be *our* day."

Quillian's hesitations were all forgotten; he surrendered himself without reservation to the joy of the moment.

They crossed Richmond Green where their eyes lingered on the remains of the Palace and Maids of Honour Row; on finding themselves in George Street, Vesper made for a sweet-shop.

"I want some ginger-beer out of a stone bottle," she said.

"Why ginger-beer?" he asked.

"Because I feel like it. You'd better have some, too."

Quillian was surprised to see her sip her glass critically and leave most of it.

"It didn't do," she said on their leaving the shop.

"What do you mean?"

"I used to love it when I was thirteen, and nearly took to it as some people take to brandy. It seems to have lost all its old savour, and I suppose it's inevitable. But we'll think to-day they've lost the secret of making it."

"Have I surprised you?" she asked upon his looking at her with mingled astonishment and admiration.

"I've given up being surprised. Where shall we have luncheon?"

"In the Park, of course."

"Can we get anything to eat there?"

"Of course not; we'll have to take it."

They entered a likely shop where a portable cold luncheon could be obtained; and Quillian, in face of Vesper's protests, ordered the best of everything that was going: while it was being packed in a basket, Vesper took him outside and walked him until they found a flower-shop.

"You stay here," said Vesper. "I want to go in by myself."

"But——"

"No 'Yes, buts.' Be a good boy and do what you're told."

She had her own way, and came out with a fine bunch of violets which she insisted on putting in his coat, and said as she did so:

"This is my contribution to the feast."

"Feast!" he queried.

"Of simple happiness."

Quillian would not hear of the shopkeeper's suggestion that one of his men should carry the luncheon basket; it was considerably heavier than he thought, but he took a subtle pleasure in enduring discomfort that was for the ultimate physical satisfaction of the girl at his side.

They did not go as far as the Terrace: at Vesper's instigation (she appeared to know Richmond well) they took something of a short cut by a side road from Church Hill which admitted to the Park by an iron gate at the farther end.

"Thank you so much," she said upon their leaving bricks and mortar definitely behind them.

"What for?"

"Trees. They're necessary to me. Now I'm ever so happy."

"Isn't that rather heavy?" she asked after they had gone some way.

"Not very."

"Ged rid of it."

"And go back for luncheon?"

"Don't be dense. By eating it, I mean. Only let's find somewhere nice."

'Somewhere nice' was somewhat hard to find, for Vesper exercised a critical discrimination in the selection of a likely spot and with complete disregard for the weight of the basket.

She was, at last, satisfied by lighting on a tree-trunk that was obligingly resting beneath a gracious chestnut.

"There's one thing we've forgotten," she said as he proceeded to unpack.

"Knives and forks?"

"Cigarettes."

"I've plenty."

"Any 'Gyppies'?"

"'Gyppies'!"

"Egyptian, I mean. We used to call them 'Gyppies' in Malta."

The mention of this place recalled to his mind the unspeakable Maltese 'College': for a few moments his happiness was clouded by its associations.

"Why so silent?" she asked.

"I—I was thinking how much you have been about."

"Haven't I! I was there three years and hated it. Where's that cigarette?"

The fact of her disliking Malta of course meant that she had been at issue with her father over the latter's bogus 'College': the cloud passed away, and he handed her his cigarette-case and matches, as he said:

"Do you smoke much?"

"Like a kitchen chimney. I've been dying for one all day."

"Why didn't you tell me before?"

"I was shy," she said, with a pretty assumption of demureness, before striking a match and holding it between her almost folded hands.

Quillian watched the cigarette between her red lips out of the corners of his eyes while he laid the luncheon to the best of his ability, and then passed his hands over the tree-trunk on which Vesper had seated herself.

"This won't do," he said.

"I thought it a very well-behaved trunk."

"Isn't it damp?"

"What if it is?"

"You'll sit on my coat," he said, and proceeded to take it off.

"I'll do nothing of the kind. As if I should have you catch cold for me!"

"But——"

"If it isn't improper, you can sit on a bit of my dress."

This was not the easy thing it seemed, for Vesper's frock was rather tight fitting; she succeeded in providing the merest fraction for his use, and with this he was more than content.

Quillian had never made such a delicious meal: he tried to carve the cold chicken, and made such a mess of it that Vesper took the carving-knife and fork from his hand and insisted upon doing it herself: it was then they had words with regard to her insisting upon his having the liver-wing.

Afterwards they had 'Maid of Honour' cakes for which Richmond is famed, and fruit, including strawberries with cream; and as she put some of these into her mouth, he was certain that the redness of her lips put the strawberries to shame.

Then they had a long rest during which little or nothing was said: they sat and smoked in a tender silence.

Quillian's eyes would roam across the undulating sward and dwell upon the trees that had long taken their new raiment as a matter of course: he thought it was ever so good to be alive on that July day, and to drowse in the gracious sunlight: and should the grass, and the trees, and the sunshine furnish an unsatisfying explanation of the gladness that sung in his heart, he had only to turn to the girl at his side (he not infrequently did) and gaze at her appealing profile.

Vesper had slipped from the tree-trunk; she now reclined against it with a delightful abandon, and with her hands behind the rich brown head of hair from which she had removed the hat, and stuck this last to the ground with a pin to prevent it from blowing away.

Her eyes (they were almost blue to-day) held a dreamily soft expression; and such wind as there was, together

with the excitement of the day's doings, had coloured her cheeks and threw into an exquisite relief the whiteness of her slender throat.

Small matter for wonder that Quillian repeatedly regarded her.

His glance presently fell on the carcase of the fowl; the partly consumed bottle of red wine; then, from the sweep of sword to the shapely girl at his side: the quatrain from Omar Khayyam, which Mrs. Lownes had repeated, came into his mind; and he resisted a disposition to recall the young woman to whom she had suggested applying it.

And very soon, his senses played him a trick: instead of the unmistakably British park-land, was a waste of yellow sand, which was greedily encroaching on the oasis where he rested beneath a date-tree with the desire of his heart.

They had made their midday meal, and it seemed to him she too was taking her ease after singing his favourite songs: presently, they would eat and drink again, after which she would sing once more.

And upon his almost recovering himself and asking, as he had done where someone else was concerned, if such an existence were possible with the girl at his side, the reply came quickly that he was more than content, and wanted nothing more on earth.

CHAPTER XVII

‘ BESIDE ME SINGING IN THE WILDERNESS ’

QUILLIAN mentally rubbed his eyes, and became his every-day self.

On perceiving his now familiar surroundings, he owned to being sorry (and was not very ashamed) that he was part and parcel of a world of occidental matter-of-factness.

“ What have you been dreaming of ? ” she asked.

Her voice had become even richer, and seemed to come from her heart.

He made some sort of mention of the impression that had held him ; he also repeated the quatrain.

She was silent for what seemed a considerable time, and Quillian attentively regarded her.

“ Do you know any more of it ? ”

“ No.”

“ Not ? ”

“ I only know what was repeated to me.”

“ There is this :

“ That moving finger writes ; and having writ,
Moves on : nor all thy Piety nor Wit
Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,
Nor all thy tears wash out a Word of it.”

It was his turn to be silent ; a little later, she said much as if she were speaking to herself :

“ And don’t you forget it : but it doesn’t very much matter if you do, for you’ll soon get reminded of it.”

Quillian sighed.

“ I’m spoiling your day,” she cried. “ What a pig I am, and you so good ! ”

“ What do you mean ? ”

"Taking me out like this. Talk of something else and forget it."

He did as he was bid; thereupon, and thereafter, it seemed to him that both of them wore a mask of desperate frivolity in order to hide the simple, serious things which stood almost nakedly revealed in their inner consciousness.

Now and again, there was an involuntary drop to earnestness.

"Are you like this to all the women you meet?" she asked.

He looked at her in great perplexity.

"And you must meet so many!" she went on.

"If you mean, if I think of every woman as I think of you, you are mistaken," he said gravely.

The flush deepened on her cheek; her eyes sparkled with pleasure.

"Before I left the monastery," he went on, "my Superior gave me a lot of advice with regard to whom I should meet."

"Indeed!"

"He particularly warned me against beautiful women. He said that all of them had at least seven devils in their hearts."

"That old priest knew something," she returned.

"What!"

"If he weren't a priest, I should say he'd 'been there before.' Did he say any more?"

"Among other things, he told me that if I took up good works, the plucking of only one brand from the burning would be enough."

"He said that!"

"Yes."

"I wonder—I wonder if I shall be that brand!" she said musingly.

"You!"

"Why not?"

"You are more likely to show me the way to heaven."

Vesper looked sharply at him; avoided the earnest look in his eyes; and asked, as if saying the first thing that came into her head:

"What do you think of women?" Before he could reply, she added: "Aren't they cats?"

"Cats!" he cried in astonishment.

"Yes, cats. I hate them!"

"But——"

"And they hate me. Don't say any more about them, or it will be your turn to try and spoil our day."

"I could never do that," he murmured.

"That's very nice of you. But then you're always nice to me; and I do so hope you're not so nice to every girl you meet, unless, of course, to—well—never mind."

Quillian tingled with pleasure; Vesper's face hardened.

"But 'to return to our muttons,'" she continued.

"Since you are so nice to me, you must like me a little. Is that so?"

"It is so."

"Thanks. I'm so flattered. It isn't every day a girl gets a man like you to say such things, and as if he meant it."

"But then you're quite different from other girls!"

"That's either the remark of a very worldly man who's trying to flatter a girl, or of one who is exceptionally single-hearted."

"Which am I?" asked Quillian in an uncharacteristic burst of egoism.

"The worldly man, of course. But how is it you don't so much as suspect I'm—well, selfish and all the rest of it, like every other woman is at heart?"

"You should not say that," he remonstrated.

"Why? Why? Why?" she cried with a pretty petulance.

"Because you are good, and true, and everything I should wish a woman to be. You remind me, oh ever so much, of a saint in a world-famous stained glass window of our monastery."

"Who was she?"

"St. Teresa. She sought to die for the Faith."

"What was she like?"

"Beautiful."

"You must be mistaken!"

"Indeed, I'm not."

"In thinking me like her—in myself, I mean."

"But——"

She shook her head as might an adorably naughty child.

"It's only right you should know the truth about me," she went on. "I'm ever, ever so worldly. I loathe philanthropy, and hate good works: I believe I told you before; and I don't suppose you believed it. It's none the less true."

"I cannot, will not, believe it."

"But you must, because I want you, of all people, to know the worst of me. I'm ever so worldly; ever so keen at heart on having a good time; ever, ever so selfish."

"Do you know why I can never believe it, apart from what I know?"

She looked at him inquiringly, and he went on:

"From what your father said of your grief after you had seen the palmist who told you—told you——!"

"That I should never have any children?"

"Yes. Who could think ill of you after that?"

She reflected for a moment, before saying:

"That proves nothing. The girl is the stepmother of the woman."

"You sacrifice truth to gain your point. But whoever is right, you have been very unselfish to-day."

"How?"

He glanced at her and their eyes met: there was a tense silence broken by her saying, and more seriously than before:

"After all, there are excuses for me. You don't know, no one knows, the rotten time I've had. I often wonder how I've kept my 'end up' even so well as I have."

"There is the true Vesper—Miss Hemmingay, I mean."

"That's all right. I'm Vesper to you—to-day. And your name's Paul?"

"Yes."

"I like that. That's ever so nice. And you're Paul to me—for to-day, that is to say, if you don't very much mind."

"I don't think I very much mind."

"That's all right," she said contentedly. "And as for

the rest, we are what we are, and all the talking in the world won't alter it."

"There is one thing I should like to ask you."

"Ask away."

"You speak as if your life were and would be innocent of love. How can that be?"

She waited before replying, and rather heatedly:

"If you were any other man, I should tell you love didn't exist. To you, I say I mustn't think of it."

"And why, pray?"

"No: no: no!" she said decidedly.

"Have you never thought of it?"

"I daren't."

"Daren't!"

"It frightens me," she said in a low voice.

"Why?"

"I'll tell you, Paul: only call me Vesper once."

"Why, Vesper?"

The name lingered on his tongue.

"If I had had quite a different upbringing, Paul, and things had been different from what they have been, I believe that somewhere about me, I could care for someone—it would have to be someone quite exceptional—rather badly."

"And why shouldn't you?" he cried.

"That is all impossible: I shut it from my heart."

"Wouldn't it be the crown and flower of your life?"

"Don't compel me to answer. I don't want to speak, much less to think of it. Talk of something else—to please me."

He did her bidding with an effort, and thenceforward it was as if there were a significance in their fellowship that subtly deepened their understanding of each other.

They rose from where they had been sitting so long, and got rid of their luncheon impedimenta as soon as may be by walking to the big gates and by Quillian's paying a likely looking man to convey it to the shop where the things had been bought.

Then they struck into the heart of the Park, and presently came upon, and followed the course of, a little stream.

More than ever it seemed that they were evading a discussion of the serious issues which persistently haunted their minds; largely to this end, they exhibited a lively curiosity in the past lives of one another.

Quillian told Vesper more of his days at Ypres, and answered the thousand and one questions she plied him with; upon his seeking to learn of her existence before he had met her, she gave indefinite replies: he saw she was not disposed to satisfy his curiosity, and gave up the attempt.

She became more reserved than she had been (he marvelled at her changes of mood), and upon their bearing to the right, and coming upon the Kingston confines of the Park, she begged him to give her a cup of tea.

"I shall be all right then," she told him.

They had tea in the garden of a cottage that did a small business in catering; after Vesper had enjoyed a couple of cigarettes, they retraced their steps by the way they had come.

Once more she was light-hearted; she took off her hat and gloves; and these, together with her hat-pins, she gave Quillian to take care of, before becoming as vehemently joyous as an irresponsible tomboy released from school.

She was here, there, and everywhere; Quillian's eyes eagerly drunk in her gracious movements; the slimness of her ankles (she wore open-work brown stockings) and the nimbleness of the little brown shoes.

"Why aren't you a dog?" she asked suddenly.

"Why?" he replied, his grave nature striving to catch something of her frivolity.

"So I could run with you. A big black retriever, say! If you were, would you run for stones I threw for you?"

"Isn't it a dog's nature to?"

"And would you love it if I patted your back and kissed your nose?"

"It's conceivable."

"And would you wag your tail with pleasure when you saw me coming?"

"I might."

"Only might? And bite anyone who molested me?"

Before he could reply with a resolute affirmative, her ears had caught the lilting melody of a waltz that was being played by a piano-organ without the Park.

"Listen!" she cried. "Do you know it?"

"No."

"It's 'Over the Garden Wall': I know the words of the refrain. And if you don't know them, it's time you did."

Upon this being played by the piano-organ, Vesper sang as follows:

"O come over the garden wall,
Little girl to me.
I've been lonely a long, long time
And the wall's not hard to climb;
So just jump up and then jump down:
I won't let you fall.
We'll play at sweethearts or going to be married:
Come over the garden wall."

"There! What do you think of that?"

Quillian looked at the flushed face; the shining eyes of the singer; and said:

"It depends on who sings it."

"Is that all!"

"I'd no idea you'd such an appealing voice."

"If I'd been properly trained——! Listen! Listen!"

The piano-organ was playing a dance refrain.

"I suppose you never saw the 'Miracle'?" she said.

"No."

"It was done at Olympia, and there was a young nun in it who was tempted by the world. You should have seen her dance!"

"A nun dance!"

"Only with children at first, and——!"

Vesper broke off; after looking quickly about her to see if she might be observed, and seeing no one was in sight, she cried:

"Watch!"

She went from him a little way; and with her hands on her hips, she waited for the recommencement of the *motif*. When this was reached, Vesper danced.

He was a trifle shocked for the moment, but in the twinkling of an eye he was entranced by the abandon of

her delicious movements; she stepped ever so lightly, ever so gracefully, and it was as though he were watching some faun who had suddenly awakened to life, and had come out of the tree in which she had slept so long.

Then Quillian's senses played him a further trick: once more the sands of the desert stretched to where they met the blue of the sky; and his well-beloved had risen from her slumber in the heat of the day, and was dancing to delight the heart of her lord.

Even now she was advancing upon him with mingled pride and humility for her reward: he would clasp this woman for delights in his arms until——

Vesper's voice recalled him to the prosaic present.

"Aren't you scandalized?"

"N'no."

"A little?"

"I had no idea you could be like that."

"I used to dance at school, and loved it; when I heard the organ, I couldn't help it just for once. So you see what a little pagan I am!"

He did not speak, and she said:

"Am I forgiven?"

"I think so," he smiled.

"Now I promise to behave myself, and set you a good example."

She was out of breath from her exertion; they alternately rested and rambled for quite a long time: and as the shadows of the trees lengthened, they were more and more weighed down by the elemental realities of life, until it seemed as if they would no longer be hidden.

"How serious we are!" he said.

"Of necessity."

"Why of necessity?"

"Surely you know that all day long we've been as we've been to—to get away from things!"

She looked at him with anxious eyes, and he replied:

"Of course!"

She seemed much relieved at learning they had been of the same mind in this respect: she broke the ensuing silence by asking:

"Why have you tried to escape them?"

"Why have you?" he returned.

"You haven't answered my question."

"Didn't—didn't you tell me you wished to have a happy day?"

"Is that the only reason?"

"I—I think so."

"I'm going to be more candid than you," she told him.

"Oh!"

"Much more," she went on, and with her eyes on the ground.

"If—if I haven't spoken of—of other things—you understand what I mean?"

"Quite."

"It isn't because I think you would not understand. It's because you're quite the only man I know who would."

Quillian did not speak: his mind still carried a picture of Vesper dancing to the music of the piano-organ; and now he knew that *she* thought more of him than any man living.

No wonder that the Park, the evening sky, and the stately trees seemed to take on the enchantment of a fairyland where happiness never grew stale and nothing beyond the confines of their paradise mattered at all.

"So there it is!" she sighed.

He was aware of the imminence of an emotional crisis; in order to stave it off, he said:

"Strange I should have met you!"

"Isn't it?"

They listened with all their ears to the evening song of a thrush; and then (they were once more seated on a tree-trunk) they again turned to each other.

"Something made me come to the hos—your house."

"What was it?"

"First of all, I was interested in your handwriting."

"That's the best part of me."

"I'm inclined to think so."

"Why?" she asked sharply.

"It led me to come."

"We should probably have met in any case."

"How?"

"Father has a wonderful nose for people with money,

particularly for those who come into it. If you hadn't written or called, he would certainly have looked you up."

"But he'd forgotten me when I came," cried Quillian ingenuously.

"Had he?" smiled Vesper.

"Yes. He told me—I see now."

"We won't say any more of that. And trust me for seeing father doesn't impose on you."

"But——"

"I can be a little devil if I like for those I like. But don't say any more. I want to think."

"What about?"

"To—to realize all this."

They sat in an exquisite silence for quite a long while, and until it was time to go.

"What about dinner?" he asked upon their rising.

"What about it?"

"We can get it in the town."

"I'll have an ice or something deadly of that kind. If we eat, there'll be others, and this is much too good to spoil."

"You think so?"

"Don't you?"

"Yes," said Quillian softly.

"Unless you are hungry."

"Not at all."

"Sure?"

"Quite."

"That's right: always consider me, and I won't forget it. And if you don't mind very much, I'll take your arm."

"Are you tired?" he asked with a great concern.

"Not a bit. But it seems the proper thing to do after a day like this."

She put her little hand on his arm: the physical contact thrilled him to the marrow.

"Your arm's quite strong," she remarked.

"I go to a gymnasium."

"Then you'll be able to keep your wife in order."

"What do you mean?"

"What I say. And there's much more in it than you may think."

"Are you serious?"

"Never more so."

"But——"

"A woman—I mean a woman who is any good—likes to know her husband won't stand any damned nonsense, and—have I shocked you?"

"No."

"Sure?"

"I don't believe I would mind anything you said," he murmured.

They walked for a while in silence.

"When are you going to be married?" she asked abruptly.

"I—I don't know."

"What?"

"I tell you I don't know."

"Aren't you very keen on her?"

"I—I suppose so," said Quillian lamely.

Vesper's hand left his arm.

"What's the matter!" he asked.

"Eh! We're coming to people and must look respectable."

She said no more on the subject until after she had had some pastries and ices, and he had loaded her with flowers and expensive sweets.

"I suppose she is of your faith?" she remarked.

"Of necessity."

"And if she weren't, I suppose she'd 'go over' in no time?"

"What do you mean?"

"Any girl would if that stood between her and the man she cared for. I'd be a Mormon for the man I loved."

"What will you say next?"

"But I'd take jolly good care he never had another wife."

They set out to go back by train; they were so interested in each other that, instead of changing, as they should have done at Turnham Green, they went on to Addison Road, Kensington, where she declined his offer of a cab, and on returning the way they had come, they almost got to Ealing before they realized their mistake.

And so far as Quillian was concerned, he was in the mood to go on getting into wrong trains with Vesper for ever.

At last, and with a great sinking of spirit, he stood with Vesper at the gate of her father's house.

"I'm not going to thank you," she said. "Your reward must be to *know* how much I've enjoyed myself."

"I'm going to thank you."

"I won't listen. See me to the door."

They slowly ascended the steps; on Vesper opening the door with her key, it was seen that the hall gas was turned down.

"Don't go for a moment," she said. "And while you're about it, turn up that wretched light."

His hand trembled as he fumbled with the tap with the result that he put out the gas.

"How clumsy I am!" he remarked.

"Don't bother to light it," came her vibrant voice from the darkness. "And—and don't go for a moment."

Thus they stood: although he could not see her, he was passionately conscious of her nearness.

The world, and all it meant to him, seemed to be blotted out; and all he was aware of was the scent of her body and the fragrance of her personality which, just then, only appeared to exist for him.

He strove to efface this impression; as he did so, it was again as though he were in the wilderness with his dearly beloved.

She had sung; she had danced: now, it was night: and he and she were the only living things in all that immeasurable solitude.

He was hers and she was his; and the languorous desert wind caressed them as they stood together.

Soon she would rest in his arms, while the stars that knew so much would watch above their heads: sometimes, he would be dimly aware in the night that she had awakened from sleep and had put her arms about him and kissed him on the lips; a tenderness that would sweeten their dreams until it was time to address themselves to another day of rapture.

Quillian reeled against the wall; the contact brought

him sharply to the immediate present: he wondered what Vesper had been thinking about all this time.

"Wasn't the desert wonderful!" she said.

"You saw it too!"

"And as it seemed in the night!"

Now it was as if he were borne on a resistless tide of emotion to tell her of things that the desert had whispered.

And as he strove to realize their message, she said in a voice that seemed to come from afar:

"Now go."

"But——"

"Go. I wish it."

Quillian tore himself away.

CHAPTER XVIII

A SURPRISE

QUILLIAN, with an exclamation of impatience, rang the bell for the second time.

"Yes, sir," said Mrs. Gassmann upon her answering the summons.

"You here?"

"Yes, sir. I just came in to have a word with Mr. Grumby.

"Where is he?"

"Jes gone out, I b'leeve, sir. I was jes going when I heard you ring. Was you wanting anything?"

"I only wanted to know where he was."

"Very good, sir."

"Don't go, Mrs. Gassmann," said Quillian, who was eager for distraction from his sorry thoughts. "How is your husband?"

"Poor Gassmann's no better, an' no worse, sir."

"I am sorry. Still in bed?"

"Sometimes, sir," said Mrs. Gassmann enigmatically.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, sir, he's up and he's in bed as you might say."

"Can't he do any work?"

"Not the work he likes, sir. And Gassmann is a very proud man."

"What is his trade?"

"Painter, sir: but the smell of the paint gives him colic, crool; an' 'e's so funny on his legs, no one 'll trust 'im up a ladder."

"Can't he do anything else?"

"He's been offered a job to sweep the streets."

"Why doesn't he take that on?"

"Gassmann's a very proud man, sir; 'e'd be ashamed for 'is mates to see 'im at that kind of game, poor dear."

"Surely any work is better than loafing!"

"That's what I say," cried Mrs. Gassmann with sudden conviction. "He lets his poor wife work herself to death by charing all the week and taking in washing besides. It's right down shameful."

"You haven't any children?"

"Only one, thank Gawd! She's my Annie."

"You say 'thank God!'"

"Let 'em 'ave more as wants more say I," cried Mrs. Gassmann as she made for the door.

"Don't go for a moment: I suppose I can't do anything for your husband!"

"Thank you kindly, sir, but it would be only like assisting a corpse as you might say."

"What do you mean?"

"Gassmann ain't long for this world, poor dear!"

"Surely he isn't so bad as that!"

"I know 'e's going to be took; and when he is took, it will be quite sudden."

"But, still——"

"The cat caught a mouse the other day, sir; and let it go," interrupted Mrs. Gassmann. "That's always a sign o' sudden death."

"I shouldn't go by that."

"Anyway, the very next day, which was Sunday, Gassmann took to his bed; an' smoked an' read the Sunday paper all day."

"He can't be so very bad if he did that!"

"That's what I thought, sir. And when he wouldn't get up, I threw a cup of tea at him."

"Indeed!" remarked Quillian absently. "Let me know if I can do anything for him."

"Thank you kindly, sir. I won't forget. Any message for Grumby, if I see him?"

"It doesn't matter now. I forgot what I wanted him for."

Directly he was alone, Quillian rose and restlessly paced the room: he had been irritated by Mrs. Gassmann's

presence and, at the same time, disliked being left to the company of his thoughts.

Ever since he had parted from Vesper on the evening of that never-to-be-forgotten day of days, he had known sleepless nights, during which he had lain stark awake, and again and again asked himself how it was that this daughter of a shifty, if not a disreputable, father could hold the interest for him that she did: again and again, he told himself that she was diverting his energies from achieving some purpose in his life; and upon his striving to put her out of his mind, and bend his will to the consideration of alien matters, he so frequently found himself more than ever enmeshed in the toils her personality had spun for him, that, for the time being, he had given up the endeavour as hopeless.

The utmost he had been capable of was not to see her, this in spite of the fact that it was only by the exercise of abnormal self-control, largely the result of the Discipline he had rigidly practised from his youth up, he had been able to keep away.

This morning, Quillian made a supreme effort to come to grips with this strange, new influence which had come into his life; an influence that all too frequently seemed a force compared to which any struggles he might make would be pitifully futile.

Needless to say, he still went on deceiving himself.

He told himself that Vesper's sway over his emotions was the result of a comfortably circumstanced man's proper feeling for a young woman whom a hard-hearted fate had surrounded with a questionable environment: that much of his uneasiness of mind (this was all he called it) was a subconscious consequence of his neglecting to live up to the ideals he had set before him as a beacon light by which to steer his course on leaving the harbourage of the monastery: that once he was married all would be well.

Somehow, and he did not try to account for it, whenever he thought of Mercia, she appeared to have lost pretty well all the personality she may have possessed; and to have become a mere abstraction of feminine virtues as inculcated by the Church.

And if, in his heart of hearts, he did not look forward with overmuch enthusiasm to marriage with her, he kept on telling himself it was his duty to wed her, since mating with such an one as she was the condition on which he had been released from his vows.

This assurance brought up another matter that troubled him where Vesper was concerned: there were times when he was so held by thoughts of her that his old life at Ypres seemed a ridiculous flying in the face of a Providence which offered so much, and with both hands, to the children of Wrath; that even the Faith that had hitherto stood for nearly everything in his life was almost, if not quite, a secondary consideration.

This morning, Quillian resolutely set himself to think of Mercia and all she meant (or should mean) to him: there was something so nebulous in his present conception of her that he found himself wondering whether he had not been too hasty to speak to her as he had done; whether he might have found someone as alluring, say, as Vesper (of course, since she was a Protestant, and because of her father's connection with the unspeakable 'College' at Malta, she was out of the question), and who, at the same time, would be as recommendable to his spiritual pastors and masters as the eldest Miss Lownes!

But such a search implied all sorts and conditions of pitfalls to one unskilled in women's wiles as he; and, in order to discourage this speculation, he bore in mind the warning of the Guardian at Ypres with regard to the many devils which lurked in every beautiful woman's (he became hot with anger at thinking Vesper was possessed in a like manner) heart.

No: the best thing he could do was to marry Mercia as soon as may be; in order to justify himself in her eyes, he would take up the first philanthropic work which came to hand.

And beyond handsomely assisting Father Horan in his Wapping mission, the best thing that offered itself without the making of endless troublesome inquiries, for which he was by no means in the mood, seemed to be the scheme of Lord Tayne's which Hemmingay had spoken of.

The latter had furnished him with an introduction to

this Lord Tayne: the best thing it seemed for him to do was to present it at once, and to hear what Tayne had to say.

Quillian sat down and wrote a letter to this personage: he said that, since he was blessed with ample means, he wished to do some good in the world, and would like to learn something of the project Hemmingay (from whom he enclosed an introduction) had mentioned.

To this end, he would take it upon himself to call on Lord Tayne the following morning about 11.30, and Quillian hoped he would be able to see him.

Quillian posted the letter himself (he was thankful for anything so trivial to occupy his mind) and devoutly wished it were the morrow, so that he could really have something tangible to think about.

He was so pathetically anxious for peace of mind.

Quillian spent a restless, unsatisfying day, during which he fought hard and successfully against an almost overmastering desire to seek out the house in the Fulham Road: after vainly trying to fix his mind on a series of books which he thought would in turn supply the distraction of which he was so sorely in need, he went to bed, where he was lucky to obtain a few hours of untroubled repose.

The following morning, he set out with some slight approach to a light heart for his destination, which was in Bryanstone Square; a light heart, because he told himself, and quite believed it, that now he was at last in a fair way to win the tranquillity of mind he lacked.

The door of Lord Tayne's house was opened by a manservant.

"His lordship was in," Quillian was informed. "But it was rather early to see him."

Upon asking that his name might be sent in, and that Lord Tayne would understand why he had come, the man conducted him across the hall to a room at the farther end.

Here, he was left to himself for quite five minutes, after which the man reappeared and conducted him to a library on the first floor and at the back of the house: directly Quillian entered the place, he found himself face to face

with Sister Jane, who was the only other occupant of the room.

"You!" he cried in surprise.

"I called this morning," said Sister Jane. "I heard you might be coming, and waited on the chance of seeing you."

"Dear friend!"

"Lord Tayne is my brother."

"Your brother!"

"Perhaps you remember—I don't suppose you do—I mentioned someone rather worldly who might be of assistance to you."

"Of course I'd not forgotten."

"I really came this morning to speak to him about you."

"Always thinking of others!"

"I'm afraid I'm more selfish than you think," said Sister Jane quietly.

"I'll never believe that. But—but——!"

"But what——?"

"I can't get over your being Lord Tayne's sister!"

"Why shouldn't I be?"

"It seems so unusual for one born in your position to join our 'Order.'"

"Indeed!"

"But then I could believe anything good of you!"

The almost plain face of the woman was aglow with pleasure; she fastened her dark eyes upon Quillian, who went on:

"You've been brought up in a different world from where I first met you: a world of few ideals and less faith: effort is therefore all the more praiseworthy."

"You forget: I've had trouble."

"I am sorry. But that doesn't alter the fact that you deny yourself in every conceivable way for others."

Sister Jane made a deprecatory gesture.

"It is so," he continued. "You remind me of those noble women who take vows and serve God by ministering to the sick and needy."

"Have you met many of them?"

"Only indirectly."

"I wonder if they are content!" she said musingly.

"What do you mean?"

"Are they really content at heart?" she asked with impassioned earnestness. "That's what I should really like to know. Isn't there a time when they're seized with the lust of living—freedom—air——?"

"I—I don't understand!" interrupted Quillian.

"They're women. Isn't there a time when they demand a woman's natural rights? The right to love—the right to bestow themselves on those they love—the right to live as I sometimes believe God intended us?"

Quillian looked in astonishment at the speaker; not so much because of the unexpectedness of her words, but on account of her changed appearance: she had flushed with pleasure at his telling her he could believe anything good of her: now, her emotion almost seemed to clothe her in a shining garment of comeliness: her fine dark eyes were aflame; colour had come into her cheeks; her ordinarily plain features were, for the moment, transformed.

"What are you looking at?" she suddenly asked.

"You."

"Why?"

"If I may say so, you—you look so different."

She glanced in a mirror near by, and said with something that suspiciously approached a sigh:

"That is how I used to look before—before—— But isn't it strange! I believe I'm two women instead of one. At times, I'm ever so content with my work, and want nothing else: at other times, I'm almost of the very worldly world."

"I'm beginning to give up your sex," said Quillian helplessly.

"And I'm talking about myself; and it's you I prefer to discuss!"

"Me! Why me?" asked Quillian in surprise.

"Your past is in front of you: mine is behind and done with. What interests me is what are you going to make of your life!"

"You know why I'm here!"

"I don't mean this," she remarked almost contemptu-

ously. "I mean—I suppose I'm in one of my worldly moods to-day—I mean with regard to what really means happiness to a man who has anything in him!"

"I told you what lies before me."

"Marriage!"

"Yes."

"Do you love her?"

"I—I——!"

"Do you love her, I said?"

"I—I think so."

"Think!" cried Sister Jane scornfully.

"But——!"

"As if it were a thing one could have any doubts about! Why, if you really cared for her, she'd never be out of your thoughts; your one idea would be to serve her; and when you were with her—Heavens, man, don't talk in that cold-blooded way and say 'I think so'!"

Quillian had started guiltily (he had not heard her last words); his thoughts had at once inclined to Vesper Hemmingay.

"What are you thinking of?" asked Sister Jane.

"N-nothing—that is to say, nothing of any consequence."

"Oh yes, you were. I read you so readily."

"Is that so?" asked Quillian uneasily.

"I won't say any more about that. Perhaps I'm wrong; and I hope for your sake I am.—About my brother!"

"Yes," said Quillian, who was thankful the subject was changed, a gratification the other was quick to perceive.

"He's a sharp, shrewd man of the world; and kind at heart. But don't take notice of everything he says——"

"In what way?"

"He's very cynical and doesn't believe in anything."

"But this scheme?"

"I know. But—but—there's something at the back of it; but since it concerns him alone, I'm not justified in mentioning it."

The next moment, a door opened, and Lord Tayne entered the room.

Quillian saw that he bore not the slightest resemblance to his sister; he was shortish and slight; and had keen regular features and very thin lips; his hair was touched with grey; and there were many lines about his sharp, kindly eyes: on the whole, he was a fairly well preserved man in the middle fifties.

"So sorry to keep you both waiting," he said.

"This is my friend, Mr. Quillian," returned Sister Jane.

"How do! It was Mrs. Nosworthy who kept me."

"Still?" asked Sister Jane.

"Can't get rid of her."

"Shall I see what I can do?"

"It's asking too much."

"I'll do it for you, Jim; although you don't deserve it."

"Why not?"

"Why not indeed! I'll do what I can, if you'll do your best for Mr. Quillian. Don't destroy his illusions all at once."

Lord Tayne made as if to reply, but did not; and Sister Jane glanced (it was wasted) at Quillian, and disappeared through the door by which her brother had entered.

"Won't you sit down!" said Lord Tayne to Quillian.

"Thank you. I don't know if you have seen Hemmingay lately——"

"Often."

"Oh!"

For some reason, Quillian was taken aback by this information.

"Quite often."

"Then I dare say he's explained how things are with me."

"I have heard his version."

"But——"

"And I have also heard my sister's: she has been saying ever such nice things of you: and for all her queer notions, Jane is no fool."

Quillian rather open his eyes at this reflection on the nature of Sister Jane's work; nevertheless, he went on:

"And since you know how I'm situated, I should very much like to hear more of this scheme of yours and——"

"Scheme of mine?" interrupted Lord Tayne.

"So I understood from Hemmingay."

"Leave it at that for the present. You had got to wishing to hear more of this scheme."

"And if it seems promising, even to my inexperience, I should like to assist, and very substantially."

"You mentioned inexperience," remarked Lord Tayne.

"It is why I'm here, Lord Tayne."

The other gave no heed to this remark, and went on:

"Always remember this:—Waiters, women, and the rest of the world take a man at his own valuation. If I may presume to advise you, don't overmuch advertise that inexperience."

"Anyway, I wish to be truthful; indeed, I don't think it would be much use being anything else with you."

Tayne ignored this compliment to his penetration, and said:

"Don't think me rude: may I ask how long you have been among us children of the world?"

"Several weeks now."

"May I ask how much unadulterated unselfishness you have met with?"

"Lots."

"'Lots'?"

"Your sister: Father Horan——!"

"I'm always telling Jane that our family has a keen eye for the main chance—either here or hereafter. Father Horan is scarcely the world. What about the others you've met?"

Quillian reflected a moment before saying:

"It's been said before: I dare say I should do just the same were I in their position."

Tayne reflected for some moments, before saying:

"May I be candid with you?"

"By all means."

"If I may say so without offence, I like you. I've heard a lot of you and wanted to see you to judge for myself. I see you're genuine: I'm sorry."

"Why?"

"There are breakers ahead."

"I've been warned any number of times about them, Lord Tayne."

"And to an unseasoned ship like yourself they spell—disaster. Though your money is the one thing wanting to the concern—keep it—a thousand times keep it. My dear friend, mankind is vastly obliged to you, but it don't want your—mine—or anybody else's philanthropy. It prefers going its own unsweetened way."

"I disagree," said Quillian emphatically.

"I give reasons:—The utter and complete selfishness of human nature. It can't help itself. It's subject to natural laws, whose voice is expediency; it's result, survival of the fittest."

"You allow man but the instincts of the mere animal!"

"Veneered with the accumulated misrepresentations of the ages. A man's one concern is himself. And why not? It makes his own little world of supreme importance; enables fools to be happier than wise men; and makes every man's dung-heap on which he crows seem the centre of the universe. Religion the great consoler? No. The eternal Ego."

"But, civilization, self-denial!" urged Quillian.

"Civilization—a more or less all-powerful policeman," retorted Tayne. "Self-denial—the satisfaction of a vainglorious instinct."

"The love of a mother for her child!"

"That which is bought with suffering is proportionately valued. The love of the artist for his work is the same thing."

"Our morality.—The love of husband for wife."

"Game preserves."

"The morality of our women."

"Keen appreciation of the requirements of the matrimonial market."

"The charitable work I've met with in the East——"

"Premium against revolution; and annihilation of independence of character."

"The universal recognition of the difference between good and evil. I have you there," declared Quillian, who had long since seen that he was crossing swords with no ordinary antagonist.

"That, like everything else, is being found out," returned Tayne. "Good and evil arose when one man had more than his share of flint arrow-heads. The man who wanted his neighbour's belongings was evil. And ever since, goodness has been the distinguishing virtue of the 'Have's'; evil of the 'Have-nots.'"

Quillian reflected for a moment, before crying in the manner of one who is playing a trump card:

"Love! What about love!"

"Love!"

"Yes. I have you there."

"The most selfish instinct of all. The lover's fine qualities; his magnificent leanings; and all the rest of it; are merely a more or less sound investment, the interest on which is the loved one's favours."

"But—but——" hesitated Quillian.

"Think it over and see how dismally I'm in the right," interrupted Tayne.

Quillian, who was resolved to make a further, if not a final effort, again changed his ground, and said:

"What about Providence?"

"What Providence?" asked the other sharply.

"The Providence that orders the world."

"Does it!"

"Well, doesn't it?"

"Would it annoy you if I speak what is in my mind?"

"I'm not so bigoted as to object."

"Here goes then. Where you see Providence, I only see cruelty."

"Cruelty!" cried Quillian aghast.

"It may be necessary cruelty, but that doesn't alter the fact that it exists and is necessary to existence."

"But——"

"Let me finish. For instance:—of every species (this applies to man in a less degree) millions are born into the world for whom there is no room; and the inevitable struggle for food by which the strong prey on the weak ensures the survival of those who are most capable of breeding healthy offspring."

Quillian was silent; he had come upon much the same thing in the scientific books into which he had dipped.

"Perhaps this is news to you!" continued Tayne.

"Not altogether. But surely it's possible to reconcile much of this with Divine purpose!"

"That is a matter of opinion. If you were not a sincerely religious man, for which I take leave to respect—envy you, I should urge in view of the terrible tale of bloodshed and suffering of which history is made up, and often perpetrated in the name of religion, that it was some omnipotent fiend who started this world of ours rolling through space and—— Let me finish" (Quillian would have interposed)—"and that all the sweetness, kindness and light we see in humanity is not because of him, but in very despite of his decrees."

"It is all too big a subject to go into now," returned Quillian. "I should just like to mention, however, that I have read Dr. Wallace, who says that the lower organisms scarcely know the meaning of pain."

"Do you believe it?"

"Isn't Wallace an authority?"

"On some things. But doesn't it stand to reason that flight, speed, beak and claw, all developments of offence and defence, owe their origin to the necessity of escaping from enemies, with the consequent agonies of death!"

"But—but——"

"Eat and be eaten is the law of life, and pain the master teacher: I often think we owe most of our so-called civilization to the fact of our being well fed. And if our means of subsistence were withdrawn, we should all be eating each other in a week or two. And it seems to me that much of this faith in a so-called All-wise Providence is a cowardly acquiescence in 'Might is right.'"

"I am not sufficiently skilled to counter you off-hand," said Quillian. "But even if there is some suggestion of truth in what you say, I cannot believe the world is all evil."

"Yes, but——"

"Yourself and this idea of yours for instance!" interrupted Quillian.

"What!" cried Tayne.

"This scheme of yours."

Lord Tayne became thoughtful, before saying:

"Thereby hangs rather a long tale, which would not support your argument."

"Indeed!"

"But—but take the case of another man I know who—who" (Tayne seemed to have lost his native fluency, and to be picking his words) "who has something of the same kind afoot; and on the face of it, is a practical philanthropist."

"Well!" said Quillian: the other had paused.

"He's simply taking the whole thing up for the sake of a woman."

"Oh!—How old is he?"

"Eh! About my age."

Quillian's eyes betrayed surprise; the other gravely said:

"It's only the saint and the man of anything over fifty in love who knows what love is; my friend."

"And does she care for him?" asked Quillian, who was not a little interested in Tayne's story.

"I fear not. But he wants her; she, his position and money. And there you are!"

"May I ask if he is a good man?"

"According to his lights."

"Then would the kind of woman he would care for accept a man she didn't love?"

"Millions of 'em, thank goodness. Sentiment is merely the giving of hostages to the unscrupulous."

Quillian was hot with resentment at such callousness: he did not know, and did not trouble to discover, whether he had either Vesper or Mercia in his mind, as he cried:

"Even I have been more fortunate than you. I've met a girl who—Heavens!—I've only to think of her and you're speaking blasphemy."

Tayne looked at the speaker with an amused smile and said:

"Take my advice: to win her, be kind to her; to keep her, use her badly every three weeks."

"Don't speak like that: not of her: it's infamous and—and——" (Quillian was still uncertain whether he was referring to Vesper or Mercia.) "When I think of her, it's like looking at the stars."

“Then, for Heaven’s sake, don’t. That’s how men walk into trees and tumble into ditches.”

Tayne went on talking in much the same way, but Quillian gave no heed.

His imagination had taken wing: he wondered how it would be with him if by some, of course, remote chance, Tayne had been fathering a personal experience on a conveniently fictitious someone else; and that he was willing to buy, for that was what it came to, Vesper Hemmingay for his own.

Quillian was certain this could not be since she was not that sort of girl at all: yet, the back of his mind was shadowed by a small cloud, and one that was momentarily getting larger, of suspicion with regard to this possibility.

He recalled with a pang of pain that Tayne had lost something of his self-possession on mentioning this marriage; and told himself that, owing to the other’s meetings with Hemmingay, he had probably met Vesper.

And what more likely that Tayne had fallen in love with her, as any man living would be proud to do, and wished——

Quillian dared not follow the train of thought farther.

He was hot and cold all over; and noticed Tayne’s sharp eyes were watching him.

Quillian resolved to make an effort, and put the matter definitely from his mind: the door opened just then, and a servant announced:

“Mr. and Miss Hemmingay!”

Vesper, followed by her father, entered the room.

CHAPTER XIX

THE BRAND AND THE BURNING

VESPER at once caught sight of Quillian; her face, that had been none too cheerful, took on a distressingly sad expression: it was not until some moments later he observed she was wearing a smart new hat and frock.

Lord Tayne advanced and greeted her with deferential courtesy, before nodding somewhat contemptuously to her father, as it seemed to Quillian: and if the latter had any further suspicion that it was Vesper who had won the heart of his new acquaintance, directly he (Quillian) set eyes on her, he was absolutely sure she was quite the last girl in the world to barter herself in a loveless marriage.

"Ah! Quillian!" cried Hemmingay. "Well met!"

Quillian took the proffered hand, and noticed that Hemmingay was, also, wearing new clothes: he had the whitest of spats; the glossiest of patent leather boots; and carried a new pair of gloves.

"Glad you took advantage of my introduction," he went on. "Hope you found a kindred spirit in Lord Tayne."

He said more to the same effect, but Quillian hardly listened; he kept his attention to straining-point on what was passing between Vesper and Tayne.

These two were talking together in low voices, or rather it was Tayne who was speaking, while Vesper merely returned monosyllabic replies; and so far as Quillian could see, with averted eyes: he was longing to get away from her bore of a father and have word with her.

Even while Hemmingay was discharging irritating commonplaces at Quillian, the latter could not believe from the all too few glances he was able to snatch of

Vesper that she was the girl who had sang, and danced, and made merry by his side in Richmond Park: she seemed as lifeless as on the occasion he had first met her in the office of the hospital.

Once, and once only, she caught his eye; to his consternation, a look of pain came into her face, whereupon he was filled with eagerness to ascertain what was amiss; and if it were humanly possible, put everything right as soon as may be.

Hemmingay's pomposity so annoyed him that, at last, he was moved to say a thing he regretted almost as soon as the words were out of his mouth.

"Are you any further with your libel action?" he asked.

"Libel action!" exclaimed the other in surprise.

"Against *Truth*!"

"Eh! Oh that! Pooh: pooh! I disregard it altogether."

"Still——"

"A philosopher in this life, my dear Quillian, takes the rough with the smooth. And only an idiot goes to law nowadays. All run in the interests of solicitors and barristers."

"I shouldn't have mentioned it, only I understood it was your intention."

"Quite right; so it was. Second thoughts are often best: and so many people have been unjustly slandered in the history of the world that one more or less can't possibly matter. Besides, I'm now in a position to ignore it."

"Indeed!"

"Indeed. As I told you the night you did us the honour of dining with us, 'The Lord tempers the wind to the shorn lamb.'"

Their conversation was interrupted by Lord Tayne.

"Miss Hemmingay tells me she's going home," he said.

"Going home!" cried her father.

"Yes," from Vesper.

"But—but we've come to luncheon!"

"I know, but——!"

"But what, child?"

"I'll think I'll go."

"But why?"

Vesper appeared to hesitate, whereupon her father said:

"Surely you can give a reason!"

She was silent for a few moments, and then glanced stupidly at Quillian, and said:

"Do as you please."

Tayne, who was all concern for Vesper, again approached and spoke with her, while Quillian, who was disconcerted by Vesper's desire (he half feared she wished to escape him), and Tayne's solicitude, was even more certain there was nothing in the latter: he was again compelled to bear with Hemmingay.

Very soon, however, he cut him short and said:

"Miss Hemmingay doesn't seem herself."

"It's nothing."

"Sure?"

"Quite, that is to say, physically."

"Then——"

"To tell the truth, my dear Quillian—as one of the family friends, I can surely confide in you—my dear Vesper is a little worried."

"What about?" asked Quillian sharply.

"The success of Lord Tayne's scheme."

"Oh!" incredulously from Quillian.

"Fact. Perhaps, as you know, she sometimes makes out she's indifferent for the welfare of others less happily placed; but she is what is vulgarly known as 'talking in her hat.'"

"Indeed!"

"And this 'White Slave' matter she has very near at heart."

"Is that so!"

"I may mention that some years ago one of her dearest friends disappeared, presumably kidnapped by the agents of this blackguard traffic; she is naturally more interested than one might otherwise suspect."

Quillian began to believe that the other, for once, might be nearer the truth than was usually the case, and be correctly interpreting Vesper's feelings.

"May I ask why she is worried!"

"Lack of the necessary funds."

"Is that all?"

"That's all," remarked Hemmingay ever so casually, and keeping the sharpest of eyes on Quillian. "We have the beginnings of a most influential committee, and all that sort of thing, and with the evil being in the public eye, as it were, we have only to make the merest start, and the money would 'romp in.'"

"You think so!" remarked Quillian absently; his thoughts were all with Vesper.

"Trust an old philanthropist like me to see which way the cat—ahem!—the public jumps."

"How much would you want?" asked Quillian.

"Five thousand for a commencement."

"Is that all?"

"Anything from five to ten. Perhaps nearer ten to make a really effective start."

"If it would please Miss Hemmingay, I would gladly give that."

"You would!"

"Why not?"

"But—but——" (Hemmingay was hard put to it to conceal his delight) "of course it will be under the ecclesiastical supervision you may elect to urge!"

Somehow, and for no reason at all that Quillian could see, this concession to his faith held no particular interest just then.

"And—and—Vesper, my dear!" cried Hemmingay. "Tayne!—I've news for you——"

He got no farther, for the door opened just then, and Sister Jane entered accompanied by Mrs. Brassington Nosworthy.

This last was a large, middle-aged woman with an irritatingly expressionless face, which contained big, bulging eyes; Quillian took an instinctive dislike to her on the spot.

"Here you are!" said Tayne.

"Your sister prevailed on me to stay and have a further word with you on your movement," returned Mrs. Nosworthy.

"It's very good of you," said Tayne.

"I knew it would please you. And as I think I told you, my support means my husband's."

"I think you did," Tayne remarked drily.

"Which means that if, at any time, we require his assistance in the 'House,' I have only to say so, and the thing is done."

She had fixed her bulging eyes on Quillian; seeing her interest in him, Tayne introduced her to Quillian, and said as he did so:

"Another worker in the cause of humanity."

He returned to Vesper, and while Hemmingay talked to Sister Jane, Quillian had to suffer Mrs. Brassington Nosworthy.

"Did I understand Lord Tayne to say you were working with him?" she began.

"I hope so."

"Then I shall not be wasting my time if I explain my position!"

Before he could make a civil reply, she went on:

"And I shall say to you what I said to Lord Tayne: it is this. In the arena of politics, our convictions, that is to say mine and my husband's, are antagonistic to his, since we belong to the party with a conscience. In the interests of philanthropy, however, I am prepared to overlook this unhappy divergence, and work for him if he agrees to my conditions."

Quillian murmured something or another, and with his eyes on Tayne and Vesper, wondered why the former was paying her such attention: and any searchings of heart he may have known on this account disappeared upon his once more telling himself she was the last girl in the world to sell herself in loveless marriage.

He was pulled up short by Mrs. Nosworthy, who remarked:

"Is that clear?"

"Q-uite," returned Quillian.

"Now I can go on. Charity owes its vitality—the only vitality that is worth talking about—to Royal patronage. I ask you, as I asked him, what steps have you taken to secure this essential assistance?"

"I did not know we had got so far as that!"

"That is what I am coming to: immediately something of that sort is arranged, your scheme has the support of my name. I assume a suitable building is acquired and furnished; the whole matter has been extensively advertised and commented upon in the Press; and the day of the opening ceremony has arrived. I have drawn up in my mind an arrangement for appropriately receiving the Royal patrons."

"But—but—isn't this just a little previous?" urged Quillian, whose breath had been metaphorically taken away by Mrs. Nosworthy's assumptions.

"One moment: I suppose they have arrived. And after Barnaby, my husband, has introduced me and read the congratulatory address, my two daughters Victoria and Beatrice will present bouquets."

"But—but——"

"Have no fears for the congratulatory address. I invariably write my husband's speeches: his secretary is engaged for his proficiency in golf."

"Golf!"

"Golf. Barnaby's handicap was twenty-one. Since the engagement of his last secretary, however, Barnaby has improved. His handicap is now eighteen."

"I think Lord Tayne would be a better judge of your suggestions than I," said Quillian.

"There's no harm in mentioning them to you. And while I was waiting, I jotted down my ideas for the frocks my daughters, Victoria and Beatrice, should wear."

"Is that so?" he asked for want of something better to say.

"Most decidedly. So you can see that I am already more than half disposed to give the matter my support."

Quillian looked helplessly about him; Tayne was still talking to a seemingly inanimate Vesper, so there was no chance of rescue from that quarter; and Sister Jane was engaged with Hemmingay: he was thinking if he should go, and most assuredly would have done, if it had not been for the chance of a word with Vesper and discovering what was amiss with her, when he happened to catch Sister Jane's eye.

Divining his unhappy situation, she had compassion on him, and coming over to Mrs. Nosworthy, said:

"I believe Mr. Hemmingay would like to speak to you."

"Will you excuse me?" she asked of Quillian; and as if she were fully conscious of the loss he would suffer at her defection.

"Certainly," he returned.

Mrs. Brassington Nosworthy sailed heavily in the direction of Hemmingay, and left Sister Jane with Quillian.

"Aren't you grateful?" asked Sister Jane.

"Very."

"I had twenty minutes of her."

"I've never met anyone like her."

"Wait."

"'Wait'!"

"She's nothing to some of the women you'll come across—and men, too, for that matter—if you go in for philanthropy."

He did not make any reply (he was once more glancing at Vesper) and she added: "So you see what you've let yourself in for."

"I beg your pardon," said Quillian.

"Didn't you hear what I said?"

"I'm afraid not, I—I——"

"You can't take your eyes from your charmer."

"My charmer!"

"The charmer who is not for you," she went on.

"What do you mean?" he asked sharply.

"What I say: the charmer who is not for you."

"But——"

"Aren't you engaged to be married to Mercia Lownes?"

"More or less."

"Practically!"

"Y-yes."

"Then your charmer is not for you."

"Why do you say she is my charmer?"

"Isn't she?"

"I admire and respect Miss Hemmingay very, very much."

"Is that all?"

"What else should there be!" asked Quillian ingenuously.

"What else! And since you have a friendly interest in her, you may care to know what I think of her."

"Well!" he said quickly.

"Charming; sympathetic; kindhearted; everything she should be."

"You think so!" he asked with kindling eyes, and with a heightened interest, if that were possible, in Vesper.

"Of course. All we women love one another; especially if one is middle-aged and plain, and the other has youth and looks, and the knack of appealing to men."

Quillian divined the bitterness in her voice.

"In any case, such thoughts would not apply to you," he said.

"And why not?"

"Men and worldly things hold no interest for you and——(he was again glancing at Vesper) and——"

"Yes."

"Where was I?"

"You were speaking to me, but your mind was elsewhere. Isn't that so?"

"I confess it was for the moment. I was thinking——"

"Yes——"

"How interested your brother appears to be in V——Miss Hemmingay," said Quillian.

"She is interested in his scheme."

"I am glad to hear you say that," declared Quillian; he was more disposed than ever to give it the financial assistance required.

"Why! What else should it be?" she asked.

"I've no suspicions with regard to anything else."

"Indeed!"

"I know Miss Hemmingay too well."

"Too well for what?"

"To think she would marry a man old enough to be her father for money and position."

"Other girls have done so."

"I know whom I am speaking of," said Quillian, with a self-confident smile.

"And supposing you were wrong?"

"What?"

"Supposing you were wrong?"

"I cannot be in this case, so it is not worth discussing."

"Promise me this," said Sister Jane after a few moments' reflection: "If ever you're in trouble, and without hope, which God forbid, promise you'll come to me."

"I gratefully promise," returned Quillian, who for the life of him could not see how any such need could arise.

He believed he had stayed much too long already, and had quite despaired of getting a word with Vesper, when he saw that her father, Lord Tayne, and Mrs. Nosworthy were engaged in something of a discussion and that she was seated alone.

He ached to speak to her; upon Sister Jane being referred to by Hemmingay, Quillian took advantage of his opportunity, and went over to Vesper.

"Well!" he said.

"Well!" she returned indifferently, and with her eyes on the ground.

"Is that all?" he asked.

"What else should there be!"

She looked sharply about her to discover who might be within earshot, before adding:

"Why did you come to-day?"

"Why shouldn't I?"

"Why to-day?"

"At least, I have seen you."

"When are you going?"

"But——"

"When are you going?"

"You—you wish me to?" he asked, and with a world of reproach in his voice.

She did not reply, and he went on:

"Before I go, I should like to do something for you."

"What?"

"Something that will please you."

"You can do nothing," she all but sighed.

"I'm afraid you've forgotten," he said sadly.

"Forgotten what?"

"Our day: our day in Richmond Park."

"I've forgotten everything."

Her words struck a chill to his heart.

"I must," she went on.

"Must! Why?"

"What did Lord Tayne say to you?"

"Many things."

"Didn't he try to convert you to his way of thinking?"

"He meant what he said kindly and, no doubt, he overstated his case for my benefit."

"Supposing his point of view were right!"

"But——"

"Supposing it were true!"

"Surely you don't think so!"

"But supposing——"

"I cannot admit it for one moment. There's more than enough wretchedness and misery in the world, God knows. But there's plenty of honest endeavour; uncomplaining heroism; persistent unselfishness: and, above all, there's love. Surely some of these redeem the rest?"

"Love doesn't!"

"Not!"

"It doesn't exist."

Quillian recalled how Mrs. Chatillon had said much the same thing: he was moved to protest, but before he could speak, she went on:

"Unless as a horrid kind of selfishness: everything that's low and beastly, and wants to justify itself; the veriest buying of women in the marriage market-place, are all excused by that word!—— I can't say it: I hate it."

"I know there are women of that sort," returned Quillian, who was surprised by her sudden vehemence.

"Lord Tayne told me of one just now."

"Who?" asked Vesper quickly.

"He gave no name."

"Well—go on."

"And with regard to that, I have an admission to make."

"Oh!"

"Seeing him pay such attention to you, for a moment I was base enough to think it might be you."

Vesper gave a mirthless little laugh.

"Then, I was very angry with myself," he continued. "I told myself you were quite the last girl in the world to do such a thing: and I thanked God for it."

She made a non-committal gesture, and turned away.

"I have only to think of when I first knew you to believe in you as—as I would wish to believe in you," he went on.

"It was on a Wednesday. I haven't forgotten."

"Ah!"

"There was no milk for the patients, and no money. If it hadn't been for a sovereign someone put in the box, I don't know where we should have been," she said grimly.

"I knew you ever so long before that. In our chapel at Ypres there is a world-famous stained-glass window. And as I think I told you, it was of a saint who wished to die for the Faith: was—not is; for when I think of it, you are there instead."

Although Vesper was apparently greedily listening, she laughed contemptuously (it was somewhat mechanical), and said:

"In far-away Ypres!"

Quillian glanced sharply about him; seeing the others had moved farther away (if he had been less engrossed in his companion, he might have divined they were speaking of him) he said:

"Don't speak like that! It's a wonderful old city, all old walls, and red roofs, which has helped to make history: and if one has ears to hear, there are echoes of the tramping of the armies that have marched through its streets. But now——"

"But now!" she urged as he stopped.

"It's all in decay; and with the grass growing in the streets."

"Like everything we look to and long for: wind stirring the grass in the streets."

"The things I believe in are not like that," declared Quillian earnestly.

"Oh!"

"I'm about to prove my faith!"

She made some remark, but he gave no heed, and approached the little group which was still deep in discussion.

"You say it is entirely a question of funds!" Mrs. Nosworthy was saying as he came within earshot.

Before anyone could reply, Quillian said to Tayne:

"I do not know if you are speaking of your scheme?"

"My scheme!" returned Tayne in surprise, and glancing significantly at Hemmingay.

"No matter who originated it so long as Miss Hemmingay is interested," continued Quillian. "And because of this interest, I will subscribe whatever sum is needed to make a start."

"You will!" said Tayne who shook his head at Quillian as much as to say he should do nothing of the kind.

"I will. Nothing will shake my determination. And be it understood, I am doing it to please Miss Hemmingay."

"Women have inspired half the world's good deeds," remarked Tayne.

"Ah! Even you allow that!"

"Why not, since they're responsible for most of its wickedness?" returned Tayne.

"Now we can get along," remarked Hemmingay, and rubbing his hands.

"We were discussing influential men and women to get on our committee," said Mrs. Brassington Nosworthy. "And since newspaper advertisement is so essential to success, we should do our utmost to get hold of Sir Sylvester Meale."

"Owner of the *Daily Reformer* and the *Evening Planet*!" said Hemmingay.

"If he takes us up, he'll be really invaluable."

"Why not get him?" asked Quillian.

"He's a professional moralist," replied Tayne. "And professional moralists are dogs in the manger who keep others from having what they daren't enjoy themselves."

"A cheque to one of his social reformation funds might get him," urged Hemmingay.

"Why not try!" said Quillian. "I'll see to the cheque."

"There's a further difficulty so far as he's concerned," significantly remarked Mrs. Brassington Nosworthy.

"What?" asked Quillian, who, in his present mood, was determined to override all obstacles that stood in the way of pleasing Vesper.

"Well—since a little affair in the law courts. Lord Tayne, may I mention it?"

"Is it necessary?" returned Tayne.

"It will take a lot of getting over by Sir Sylvester Meale."

"That's all over and done with," remarked Sister Jane.

"Indeed!"

"Lord Tayne is going to be married."

"May I ask to whom?"

"Miss Hemmingay."

"V—Miss Hemmingay!" cried Quillian.

"Miss Hemmingay has done me that honour," declared Tayne gravely.

That evening, Quillian, in the comparatively lucid intervals permitted by his unquiet thoughts, wrote a very long letter to Mercia, telling her that the opportunity of doing something in the world had unexpectedly presented itself; and that all his energies were about to be concentrated on the plucking of a certain brand from the burning.

CHAPTER XX

' FOOLS RUSH IN '

" HULLO, Quillian !"

" You are a stranger !"

" Lucky I found you in."

" I am pleased to see you. I'd some thought of coming to see if you were still in town."

" Anywhere in London is better than the beastly country, even at this time of year. Got five minutes ?"

" Yes," returned Quillian absently.

" Good. I want your advice," returned Tommy, whose fat face looked pasty and flabby.

" My advice !" asked Quillian in surprise.

" Y-yes. Fact is, I'm in somethin' of a hole."

" Oh !"

" And after all said and done, two heads are better than one."

Quillian reflected that this trite observation, also, applied to his own sorry condition of mind.

" May I sit down ?"

" Of course."

" Thanks."

Notwithstanding this request, Tommy Chalfont restlessly paced the room without speaking, while Quillian's thoughts were entirely taken up with a matter that was never remote from his thoughts.

" Here goes," said Tommy suddenly.

Quillian looked at him in bewilderment.

" Didn't I tell you I was going to ask your advice ?"

" I—I believe you did," returned Quillian, who tried to bring his attention to bear on his friend."

" Remember May Fothergill ?"

" Wasn't she the—the—— ?"

"The little flapper you took in who'd lost her aunt, and all that sort of thing."

"Of course, I remember. Well——"

"Well, old sport, she's fairly taken me in, and—and that's why I've come to you."

"She's taken you in?" asked Quillian, with as much surprise as his own preoccupations would admit.

"Fact. I'm in a devil of a hole—and—and—I want you to get me out of it."

At any other time than the present, when Quillian had more than enough to worry about, the fact of Tommy Chalfont, who had boasted of his nether-worldly smartness, and who had offered to pilot Quillian through the shoals and quicksands of London Life, coming to seek the latter's assistance owing to a scrape he had got into with a young woman, would have appealed to Quillian's sense of humour: as it was, it was as much as he could do to bend his mind on what Tommy had to tell.

"But—but——"

"I know, old dear," said Tommy, with an imperturbability that veneered a certain shamefacedness. "And as it's no good my tellin' you only a part of the yarn, you may as well have the 'whole shoot,' and have done with it."

"You mean to say you saw her after she ran away from here?"

"Yes, old chap: that's about the size of it. And I don't mind admittin' that that little flapper struck me all of a heap: case of love at first sight, and all that sort of thing."

"But—but——"

"Let me get it 'off my chest,' and then we'll know exactly where we are."

Quillian was silent (his thoughts had suddenly taken wing): the other went on:

"And let me say at once that there was nothin' between us; nothin' serious, I mean. If there had been, you're scarcely the chap I should have come to."

"Indeed!" remarked Quillian absently.

"I was much, much too fond of her for that sort of thing."

" Oh ! "

" And it wouldn't have been any use if I'd tried anythin' on," said Tommy; who added ingenuously: " She was a jolly sight too ' wide.' "

" I'm still in the dark," urged Quillian. " I don't understand how you came to see her after she left here."

" It's this way, old sport. When you left her alone with me—I—I gave her my address to write to if ever she were in a hole " (Tommy did not relate that he had asked Miss Fothergill to communicate with him), " and sure enough I heard from her the very next day."

" You didn't tell me ! "

" N-no. I—I didn't want to ' give her away.' Anyway, I trotted her about all over the place, an' kept her goin', an' gave her a high old time: don't dare to think what I've chucked away on her; and sometimes—specially after a cosy little feed—I don't know what I wouldn't have done if it hadn't been for the pater."

" For the pater ! " queried Quillian, who, as a matter of fact, had only heard the last three words.

" Just imagine his face if I'd made her Mrs. T. C. Anyway, there it is."

" There what is ? "

" Haven't I told you everythin' ? "

" I—I don't think so."

" Eh ! Here goes, then. Would you believe it if I told you that that innocent-looking little flapper, who seemed as if she couldn't say boo to a goose, has a husband and has been married over a year ? "

" Is that so ? "

" It is so," almost groaned Tommy. " Now you see where I am."

" But if you've done nothing to reproach yourself with—— ! "

" I told you I hadn't."

" Did you ? "

" 'Course. Don't you remember ? "

" Perhaps you did. The fact is, I'm a bit worried myself."

" Bet you ain't half as much as I am. Anyway, we'd

come to, if I'd nothin' to reproach myself with, which I haven't."

"What is there to trouble about, then?"

"Trouble about! I've got to make the husband see it," almost wailed Tommy.

"What sort of a man is he?"

Tommy reflected before saying:

"Should think he could hit hard if it came to it, an' he's got a good long reach. Dare say, though, I might manage to knock him out if my wind were better."

"I don't mean that. What sort of a man is he otherwise?"

"Right enough in his way."

"Then why hasn't he looked after his wife?"

"That's another nasty 'bif' for me. Seems they had a row soon after they were spliced, an' she went off, an' refused to live with him."

Quillian was silent (he was lost in his own concerns), and the other, after regarding him with a hurt expression, went on:

"Made her an allowance and all that sort of thing. And here we are!"

Upon Quillian failing to make any comment, Tommy said:

"An' that's the girl who told me, when I once asked if she were 'drawin' the long bow,' that she couldn't tell a lie, as she didn't know the way."

Tommy went on talking, but Quillian paid no heed: he was thinking how vastly different a certain young woman was from the vulgar little adventuress who had victimized his friend; and how the former, for all that certain appearances were against her, was not only a creature of a rarer clay, but was one who lived, and moved, and had her gracious being on a far higher plane.

Tommy's voice interrupted his broodings.

"Didn't you hear what I said?"

"N-not quite."

"I wanted to know if you wouldn't mind seein' him and tellin' him there was nothing wrong between us. He might believe it if it came from you."

" I'll certainly do all I can—that is to say, if I get time."

" If you get time !" said Tommy questioningly.

" I'm rather—well—busy just now."

" Eh !"

" And rather worried, too. It's the reason, one of the reasons, why I thought of looking you up. You might be able to advise me."

" What is it ?" asked Tommy, with no particular enthusiasm.

" It's—it's about a certain young woman I met some weeks ago."

" Hullo !"

" It's nothing to do with what you would naturally think. Anything but. My interest in her, which, I admit, is very keen, is only friendly."

" Does Mercia know about it ?" grinned Tommy.

" I've mentioned it more than once in my letters."

" Oh !" ejaculated Tommy, who quickly lost the curiosity he had suddenly shown.

" The fact of the matter is she is about to make a loveless marriage," said Quillian gravely.

" What of it ?" off-handedly from Tommy.

" What of it !" cried the other in astonishment.

" Millions of 'em do it every day. An' thank God for it."

" What do you mean ?"

" What I say. From what I see of life, an' I'm no fool, as you know, it's always those marriages which turn out best in the long run. Those who're ' potty ' on each other jolly soon cool off."

" But—but——"

" That's the one thing that cheers me up when I think of losing that dear little flapper."

" This is altogether different," said Quillian gravely.

" Eh !"

" Absolutely and completely."

" It always is," returned Tommy with a sickly grin.

" The young woman I have in my mind has a very rare nature: she is altogether different from any other woman in the world——"

"Includin' Mercia!" interrupted Tommy.

"Mercia stands alone," returned Quillian with a gesture of annoyance. "And I'm always wondering what my duty is in the matter."

"Your duty!" repeated Tommy absently.

"I feel it isn't right to see a rare nature like her's sacrificed into slavery, for that is what it means, nothing more and nothing less, without doing something to stop it."

Tommy concealed a yawn: the other went on:

"I don't expect you to see exactly eye to eye with me on the matter, because it is your misfortune you don't know her. But—but——"

"Yes," from Tommy, as Quillian rose and, in his turn, fell to pacing restlessly the room.

"Anyway, I'll be off now, old sport."

"Off!"

"I'm going to have a jolly good feed: best of everythin'. Only way to take my mind off that little flapper."

"I haven't told you half."

"'Bout what you're goin' to do for me in that direction?"

"Good Heavens, no! About Miss Hemmingay!"

"Oh!"

"The whole thing's monstrous; hateful; unholy. It's things like that which assist the Powers of Darkness."

Tommy edged nearer to the door.

"Can one wonder at the spread of ungodliness if such things are done openly and with no one to say them nay?"

"Suppose she said 'Yes' to whoever it is?"

"Eh!"

"And I s'pose she ain't no fool?"

"Anything but," declared Quillian with a world of conviction in his voice.

"Then what can you do? Free country, y'know."

"But—but——"

"Come along with me and have a rippin' good feed. That's the only way to forget all about it."

"I don't wish to forget."

"An' if you come, I'll tell you all sorts of things about that artful little flapper."

" I couldn't forget if I tried."

" It is hard lines, isn't it, old sport ?" said Tommy, with the suspicion of a break in his voice.

" About Miss Hemmingay ?"

" The way I've been done in the eye. I was fond of that little girl. And to think she was married all the time, and never said a word about it !"

" What do you think I'd better do ?"

" See hubby as soon as possible, and crack up my moral character to the skies. His address is on the back of this card."

" But about Miss Hemmingay ?" asked Quillian anxiously, as he took the card from the other.

" That's all right," returned Tommy reassuringly.

" All right ! How can it be all right ?"

" Try and put your spoke in, an' see what you'll get for your pains."

" If it's a question of duty——"

" So long, old sport. Mind you wire or 'phone me d'rectly you've made it all square with hubby," sighed Tommy, who betook himself rather hurriedly away, and left Quillian to the companionship of his thoughts, which were at once taken up with the matter that had filled them to the exclusion of pretty well everything else since he had learned of Vesper's engagement to Lord Tayne.

The blow of this announcement had bruised his sensibilities; for two or three days he had been as one stunned: he had been aware of a dim sense of discomfort; and that was about all.

Then he had suddenly known a passionate anxiety for Vesper on account of the loveless union she was about to make; and a curious part of his concern was that it never so much as once occurred to him to blame her for her part in the bargain—indeed, in his eyes she was without fault; there was such an absence of alloy in her rare nature that he heaped odium on her father and Lord Tayne for their share in the hateful transaction.

Quillian had made it his business to find out all he might of this Lord Tayne; and had speedily learned that the latter was a man with an undeniable past: he had married soon after coming of age; and a few years later

had discredibly figured in, at least, two divorce cases, with the consequence that his wife had obtained a judicial separation.

The latter had died some five years back, and now, from Quillian's point of view, Tayne was to consummate a life of wrongdoing by mating with a girl who was young enough to be his daughter.

Incidentally, it may be mentioned (and this fact vexed him not a little) that the one or two women (including Mrs. Chatillon, whom he had written to with regard to obtaining her support of the projected 'White Slave' Rescue Home; and had received a very favourable reply almost by return) he had asked about Lord Tayne had made light of his backslidings, and invariably referred to him as being 'ever such a good sort.'

From the bottom of his heart Quillian knew that this loveless marriage was an unspeakable abomination: he was, also, as well aware of his helplessness to put matters right.

The knowledge of his impotence filled him with blind rage, and indisposed him to take the whole thing philosophically: he burned to do something of moment, but the bother was to know what.

And should he ever ask himself, as he not infrequently did—this more particularly in the silent watches of the night, when anything beyond a fitful doze was impossible—why he was sorely troubled at the fact of the personable daughter of a heretic adventurer making a good match, he told himself, and quite believed it, that he was plucking the first brand from the burning that came to hand in order to make himself worthy of the saintly Mercia.

It was necessary to do some good work, and had not the Guardian of Ypres told him that the saving of but one soul from perdition was enough?

And how much more was it in his favour if the brand he plucked should be one of those alluringly beautiful women who, according to the Guardian, had at least seven devils in her heart!

There was no possibility of denying Vesper's comeliness—indeed, should Quillian think on this aspect of her, he travailed in agony of spirit and figuratively cried aloud in his torment.

More than once his anguish made him ask himself if his immense concern for Vesper did not arise from a warmer emotion than friendship; and his reply was that, in the nature of things, this sentiment could not possibly be love, since, in the latter eventuality, it would mean that, in seeking to prevent her marriage, he would be moved by the most selfish of motives: he conveniently forgot, for the time being, Tayne's assertion with regard to the covetousness inseparable from love; and told himself that anything worthy of the name was wholly selfless.

This explanation satisfied his superficial searchings of heart: as if to further assure himself that he was not guilty of loving Vesper, he had sent Mercia a costly ring, and had begged her to wear it as a pledge of their betrothal.

To-day, over and above being afflicted by his everyday tribulations regarding Vesper's loveless match, Tommy's words respecting the fact of her doing what she was about to do of her own free-will buzzed in his brain and sorely vexed him.

This was a point of view which had not occurred to him before; in his anxiety to clear himself of any taint of venality, he set about imagining all sorts of situations in which it might appear her bounden duty to marry Tayne for the sake of others: chief of these (desire for the success of the 'White Slave' Home would not hold water) was the necessity of getting her father free of some exceptional piece of shadiness.

If this were so, Quillian told himself, and it were merely a question of money, he did not care if he beggared himself in order that Vesper should not make an unspeakable sacrifice on the altar of filial duty.

Assuming this was the case, the next thing was to discover the precise state of affairs; but any inquiries he might make meant treading on such delicate ground that, more likely than not, he would only succeed in once and for all defeating his own purpose.

With a heartfelt sigh, and realizing his helplessness, Quillian did his utmost to bend his mind to the endless correspondence which had to do with the 'White Slave'

Home: of set purpose, he had greedily accepted (there had been no difficulty about this) the organization of the work in the fond hope of diverting his mind from the subject that persistently filled it.

A pile of letters awaited his attention; he gave intermittent attention to these; intermittent, because he would write hard for some minutes, and then stop, and dream of some pretty gesture or expression of Vesper's: then he would pull himself together, resume the letter on which he had been engaged, until his task was forgotten, and his imagination would again take wing, and in the same direction as before.

These interruptions became less infrequent, the fact of the matter being that the suggestion of finding out if Vesper had been compelled by hard-hearted circumstance to accept Lord Tayne had taken firm root in his mind: and it followed that the only way of ascertaining the whys and wherefores of it all was to summon the necessary courage to speak to her herself.

Quillian was deaf to all counsels of prudence; the more he thought of it, the more promising it seemed: he shut his eyes to the truth, which was the providing of an excuse for seeking out Vesper and having intimate word with her.

He had seen next to nothing of her since he had learned of the engagement at Tayne's house: it was not for lack of trying on his part, but on the many occasions he had sought speech with her, she had gone out of her way to evade him: this avoidance cut him to the quick, and fed the flame of his solicitude regarding her.

It was in the middle of a letter to Mrs. Chatillon in which he informed her of an early meeting of the preliminary committee—a committee on which he hoped she would consent to serve—that he clean forgot what he was at; he rose from his seat, and hastening to the telephone, dictated a communication to Vesper which was to be telegraphed to the hospital; in this he asked her to meet him some time in the afternoon, as he wished most particularly to see her.

If Quillian had hoped that the sending of this message would ease his mind, he was woefully mistaken; he suf-

ferred an agony of suspense until the prepaid reply arrived, which it did not do until nearly two hours had elapsed.

When it came, he tore open the buff-coloured envelope with trembling hands, and read:

" Outside the Servites four."

Long before this time, Quillian was impatiently pacing without the church of the Servite Fathers in the Fulham Road, his mind harassed by a thousand and one dismal forebodings with regard to the young woman he hoped to meet: one moment, his heart completely failed him for the inquiry he had in mind; the next, he was resolved to throw discretion to the winds, if only she would come: from a knowledge he had picked up of the way in which things invariably turned out contrary to what one expected, he thought to cheat fate by assuring himself she would not keep the appointment.

Later, he recalled that where he was waiting was nigh to the spot where he had obtained his first glimpse of Vesper; he augured well from the fact of her having selected this place for their meeting.

Then, in a momentary access of cold sense, he was sorry he had communicated with her; and this was succeeded by fearing that she would come with either Lord Tayne, or her father; or both. And in any of these cases——

" Is that you ?" said a voice from behind, which made music in his ears.

Surprise; delight at the fact of her being well before her time; agitation at seeing her again; deprived him of speech, and made him scant of breath.

" What's the matter ?" she asked.

" I shall be all right directly."

" But——"

" Surprise at seeing you, and——"

" I know I'm early. I've been doing a lot of shopping " (Quillian shuddered at hearing this, suggesting as it did preparations for an early marriage), " and was going home first, but saw you."

" I didn't see you."

" I got out of a taxi."

"Have you paid?" he asked quickly.

"Yes, I've paid."

They walked in silence, until she said:

"What did you want to see me for?"

"Have you had any tea?"

"Yes. Have you?"

"I don't want any. Where can we talk quietly?"

"Why?"

"I've much to say to you."

"Oh!"

"There's a turning by where I waited that seemed fairly quiet."

He turned back; and although her footsteps did not lag, his acute sensibilities believed that she reluctantly accompanied him.

"Well!" she said, somewhat sharply, upon their turning into the comparative quiet of Redcliffe Gardens.

His courage was in his boots just then, and he lamely asked:

"What have you been buying?"

"Frocks and frills."

"What for?" he asked sharply.

"Or rather a frock and frills. And if you must know, Mr. Inquisitive, it's for father's ball."

"Ball!"

"For the hospital. It's been hanging fire for a long time, but now it's definitely coming off. Of course, it's late in the season, but, as Parliament's sitting, we shan't be altogether 'left.'"

Quillian duly noted the elevation of her social plane conveyed by this remark.

"Are you coming?" she asked.

"I—I think not."

"Not to dance with me?"

"I do not dance."

"Not to see me dance?"

"No. Not to see you dance," said Quillian, with more than a hint of pain in his voice.

A further silence was broken by her saying:

"Well!"

"Well!"

" Why did you wish to see me ? "

The question was asked so sharply that Quillian, after glancing at his companion's set face, again lacked courage to speak what was in his mind.

He talked of something else; despised himself for his cowardice; realized for an all too brief moment the insensate folly of interfering in what was really no concern of his; and then, almost before he was aware of what he was doing, he had lost his self-control, and was blurting out his objections to the match.

" I'll tell you why I sent for you," he began. " Apart from my wanting to see you, and you know I always do that after—after you have been so kind and patient with me, I wanted to say something about this engagement of yours."

She gave him a frightened glance and all her attention.

" I know you will think it an impertinence," he went on, " and tell me it is no business of mine, but I cannot see you sold—yes, sold—for that is what——"

" Mr. Quillian ! " she interrupted.

" It amounts to—— ! "

" You forget yourself."

If Quillian had had any vestige of sense, he would have been pulled up short by Vesper's words, which should have warned him that such remarks from him were very unwelcome, and have made the best of a bad job by making some sort of a feeble apology: but it was as if the pent-up fires which had consumed him for so many days and sleepless nights had, at last, found an outlet; and that no words of her's could stay their flaming out.

" Oh, I know what I'm saying," he continued, " partly from what Lord Tayne admitted the day I called on him; mostly from what I know of you, which tells me you're quite the last girl in the world to marry a man—a man old enough to be your father—if you did not love him. And what I am going to say is this——"

She stopped, turned to face him, and cried:

" Do you remotely realize what you are saying ? "

He was momentarily taken aback by her vehemence: when he spoke, he said:

" I'm trying to save you."

"And how deeply you're insulting me!"

"Insulting you!" he cried, and as if such a thing were inconceivable.

"Yes, insulting me. Is that why you sent for me?"

Even then he might have bridled the evil member, had not the sight of her face, which anger had endowed with a surpassing attractiveness, poured oil on the flames of his indignation: her eyes were all but black with anger, and enhanced the fairness of her skin; the warmth of her hair.

"You know anything like that is farthest from my thoughts," he said. "But if it is humanly possible, I'm determined to save you."

"From what, pray?"

"This hateful, horrible marriage. Listen—no, I shall not let you go till you have heard me, for you know, you must know in your heart, I'm only speaking for your good. I can't tell you how it has worried me: I don't think it's once been out of my thoughts since I learned the horrible truth. And when I might be base enough to think the worst of you, something seems to say, 'It isn't her at all. She's good, and holy, and true—everything a woman should be;' and then I suffer the agonies of the damned for my wickedness in having doubted you."

He paused for very breath; disregarding her hard eyes and set lips, he went on:

"And that brings me to what I wished you to know. I'm certain—ever so certain in my heart—that you've been forced into this. When I say forced, I mean that you're doing it for—for someone to whom you owe a duty—and, but for that, you would still be free. And—and—where was I?—ah!—and if it's any question of money, I would willingly, cheerfully give every penny I possess, and sell papers in the streets, or be a cab-runner, if only you could be saved."

She did not speak; and he looked hard at her in order to see if this concern for her welfare had at all softened her heart.

Her lips were more sternly set, if that were possible; her now pitiless eyes stared straight before her.

"You believe me, don't you?" he asked weakly.

There was silence, and he said with a profound sinking of spirit:

"You—you heard what I said?"

There was a slight twitching of her lips, and that was all.

"You're—you're not really very angry?" he faltered.

Still getting no response, he said:

"I said what I said for you."

There was a further silence on her part which seemed terribly ominous.

"Vesper! Vesper!" he all but moaned.

A moment later, and the storm had burst.

"You beast—you pitifully mean beast!" she all but hissed. "To take advantage of me like this, and say such things. No, you're not a beast; for a beast has pluck, which you haven't got. You're a dirty, despicable little coward!"

He looked at her in amazement; all he seemed to be aware of was that wrath had added inches to her stature; dignity to her comeliness.

"It's no use looking at me like that," she went on, "for you know I'm speaking the truth. You wouldn't have the pluck to say what you did if I had a man with me, so you get me like this, where I can't get away from you."

He strove to speak; to explain: his tongue refused its office.

"It's about time someone told you what you were—and if you don't already know, it will open your eyes a bit. For all your parade of saintliness, you're a hypocrite—a damned hypocrite; and I'll tell you why. You get engaged to a girl somewhere else, and then you come and dangle after me. And because I choose—yes, choose of my own free-will to get engaged to a man who is a man—yes—who is a man, you have the damned cheek to come and insult me as you did."

Quillian wrung his hands in very despair.

"You deserve horsewhipping: that's what you do. And if I had a whip, I'm not sure that I wouldn't set about you."

The face of woe he turned on her appeared to incense her further, if that were possible.

"It's no use putting on that suffering martyr's face. It won't go down with me: I know you too well. And I haven't told you half. There's that—that Mrs. Chatillon!"

"What—what of her?" Quillian forced himself to say.

"What of her! More smug hypocrisy! I've seen the way she looks at you" (Quillian had been utterly unobservant of this, even if it were true) "and you at her. I'm not a fool, and know all about it."

"But—but——"

"There are no 'buts.' I know all about it. And I made it my business to know her, and ask about you; and she told me you were old friends. Isn't that so?"

Fearing to add fuel to her fury, he forebore to speak; behaviour that had the contrary effect to that hoped for.

"You don't speak! I thought so: you haven't the pluck to speak, although she had. A nice man! Even if you've spent most of your time in a monastery, you're making up for lost time!"

Her cruel words seared his heart; and made him incapable of speech.

"I knew you wouldn't be able to say anything," she went on. "And having had my say, I'll be off."

He made as if to leave her, whereupon she trembled with rage, and had difficulty in saying:

"And—and—I—I suppose having had a good time with your Mrs. Chatillon" (this was said ever so scornfully), "you'll go back to your modest Martha with your saintly expression and—— Faugh! I can't stick hypocrites!"

She waited for a moment, as if she expected him to say something.

He disappointed her; unmindful of infrequent passers-by, she almost screamed:

"Before you go, let me tell you this. If you were the last man in the world, I wouldn't look at you: I hate the sight of you."

Vesper turned from him; he laid a detaining hand upon her arm.

She shook it off as if it were some unclean thing: hastening away, she left him standing abjectly forlorn on the pavement.

CHAPTER XXI

THE OBVIOUS SEX

" I DON'T believe you're listening !"

" Indeed, I——."

" It is no use pretending. I'm trying to tell you of people who may be of use, and you're woolgathering. What is the matter with you ?"

" I'm sorry, but——"

" Is it that you find philanthropists unphilanthropic ?" asked Mrs. Chatillon.

" Why should you think that ?" returned Quillian, who said the first thing that came into his head.

" Because, if you do, you'd better drop it before your eyes are opened further."

" I—I suppose you will allow that some of our hearts are in our work !"

" How many ?"

" Else why should they take it up ?"

" Every reason. Of course, in saying this, I except Mr. Hemmingay and that daughter of his " (the speaker noticed Quillian wince); " as for the rest——"

" Meale surely means well !" interrupted Quillian.

" I suppose it's never occurred to you that all his good deeds are reported at length in the various journals he controls, which is an excellent advertisement for his wares !"

" Even that's better than spending his money in riotous living !"

" I'm not so sure."

" How can that be ?"

" It would be a very dull world if it weren't for an occasional spice of wickedness," retorted Mrs. Chatillon.

" You shouldn't say that !"

"Why not, if it's true? Supposing we were all good, and moral, and taught in the Sunday-school, the Churches' occupation would be gone; the parsons would starve; and we ardent philanthropists would be eating our heads off because there would be no one to meddle with."

"That will never come in our time," said Quillian grimly.

"Really!" returned Mrs. Chatillon, with a fine assumption of innocence.

"And you know it better than I."

"Am I so wicked?" smiled Mrs. Chatillon.

"You have had more experience of the world."

"What time are these wretched people coming?"

"Do you find them so objectionable?"

"Don't you? Of course, I always except charming Miss Hemmingay!"

"Don't—don't people take one out of oneself?" faltered Quillian.

"So you have come to that!"

"All of us have trouble some time or another."

She looked at his comfortless figure with a world of sympathy in her fine eyes; finding he was enwrapped in his thoughts, and for the time being dead to the fact of her presence, she rose to her rather disappointing height.

"Good-bye!" she said shortly.

"'Good-bye'!"

"I don't feel like it to-day."

"You're not going!"

"I feel in the mood to tell these people that the worse things these white slaves have to put up with are the methods of their rescuers and reformers."

"But——"

"My dear young friend, it's all too big a subject to go into at five minutes' notice; but take it from those who've really gone into the matter that, apart from snaring the innocent, you'll have to alter the whole economic system, and rich philanthropists must cease to employ girl labour at starvation wages before anything really effective can be done. Our efforts are the merest tinkering."

"Inevitably if none of us are sincere."

"Are you?"

" I ?"

" Yes. Had you no ulterior purpose in taking this up ?"

" In a sense."

" So I thought. And I could tell you a lot about yourself that would surprise you, subtle as men of your stamp may be."

" Now you're laughing at me."

" Indeed no. I was referring to your magnificent capacity for self-deception."

" How do you mean ?"

" I'll tell you some day, that is, if you don't find out for yourself. Good-bye."

" Must you go ?"

" You wish me to stay ?"

" Of course."

" Why ?"

" Because I feel you're a help to me with those who're coming."

" Is that all ?"

" And—and apart from your common sense in dealing with some of their silly suggestions, I always feel that you—you wish me well."

" Thank you," said Mrs. Chatillon.

" You'll stay !"

Mrs. Chatillon resumed her seat.

They were seated in a room of the temporary offices which had been taken for the furtherance of the ' White Slave ' Home; from without came the click of a typewriter, and although a thousand and one matters awaited Quillian's attention, he had practically neglected them since his arrival at something after ten, and had welcomed Mrs. Chatillon's early appearance, since he found that her presence assisted him, in no inconsiderable measure, to assuage the cruel hurt of the wounds inflicted by Vesper Hemmingay's merciless words on the occasion of his meeting her in the Fulham Road.

After that never-to-be-forgotten encounter, he had gone back to his flat as one dazed by an unexpected blow: for a time (including a sleepless night) he had failed to realize what had happened, until his mind had been permeated by a recollection of everything she had said.

He could not have forgotten if he had tried: the bitter taunts; the conviction in her voice; the consuming scorn with which she had spoken, were all livid in his memory: mingled with a conviction of deep humiliation at the failure of his plans was an ever present recollection of how magnificent she had looked when transported by passion.

The unjustness of it all (since he was sure he had only been moved to do what he had done from a frantic desire for her happiness) had barbed the arrows of her wrath, and lacerated the most susceptible places in his being; yet, with an unaccountable lack of reason in one of his orderly habit of thought, he overlooked and readily forgave her pitiful lack of fairness.

And if Quillian had hoped that the passing of the days would heal his many hurts, he was grievously mistaken.

Perhaps, away from her stinging condemnation of his well-meant efforts for her salvation (as he conceived it), the thing that rankled most was the way he had hopelessly bungled matters: he was still, and would ever be, certain that Vesper was, in some way, compelled to make a loveless marriage; the failure of the means he had impulsively chosen had once and for all closed up any other avenue of escape he may have succeeded in devising for her.

And with the fatuousness of one who had not yet learned the futility of incontinently dwelling on the 'what might have been,' his mind painfully rehearsed a thousand and one expedients for saving Vesper, which, of a surety, must have succeeded, if only he had not blundered so badly.

These more particularly on nights he could not sleep, when he would pace without the house where she slept till sunrise sent him back to his cheerless flat.

Now, and for all he could see to the contrary, things must take their wretched course; he must resign himself to the fact that his attempt to rescue but one brand from the burning had miserably failed.

There was ever the possibility of Divine interference from He whom Quillian believed ordered the ways of men: and the outpourings of his heart were surely enough to make the most deaf ears hearken.

Coincident with his lamentable experience with Vesper was a sharp fall in his interest in the 'White Slave' Home; he had paid over a large sum of money into an account from which cheques could only be drawn if signed by Tayne, Hemmingay, and himself: over and beyond that, he was sure that his want of enthusiasm was a hindrance to the success of the project; and more likely than not he would have washed his hands of active participation in its affairs, were it not for the infrequent opportunities they gave him of hearing of or seeing Vesper.

The date of her marriage had been considerably advanced, he learned from one and another of the women who sat on the committee; women who hated her for her youth and comeliness; above all, for the brilliant match she was about to make; but who, nevertheless, abjectly toadied to her for the furtherance of their several ambitions which, according to Mrs. Chatillon, were almost wholly social.

As for seeing her, she sometimes drove up to the offices in one of Tayne's motor-cars, and ever so richly attired (the stately figure she made in her fine feathers put an edge on his griefs), and accompanied either by the husband that was to be, or her father, who seemed clothed in finer raiment and more pomposity every time Quillian set eyes on him.

Vesper regarded Quillian either with cold disdain, or spoke with a satirical deference to his assumed wishes concerning unimportant details of the project—behaviour that probed wounds her brutality had inflicted.

And in spite of the pain she wittingly inflicted, he was hoping against hope he would see something of her to-day.

Apart from all this, the only success he could place to his credit was the result of his interview with May Fothergill's indignant husband, whom he had more or less convinced of the innocuousness of Tommy Chalfont's attentions to his wife.

Quillian was aware that Mrs. Chatillon was regarding him through those half-closed eyes of her's.

"I'm sorry," she said in her sympathetic voice.

"What for?"

"You. It is only what I told you in the train."

"About the impossibility of finding happiness?"

"I told you there was no such thing."

"I remember. And you also as good as said there was no such thing as love."

Mrs. Chatillon did not speak.

"Didn't you?" persisted Quillian.

"Never mind that now," she returned, a little impatiently.

Quillian was silent, and fell to wondering why it was that he was not so alive to Vesper's behaviour when, as now, he was with Mrs. Chatillon.

"I suppose you had next to nothing to do with women?" said Mrs. Chatillon suddenly.

"Before I left Belgium?"

"Yes."

"Nothing at all in a secular sense."

"Then I was the first woman you had spoken with?"

"I suppose so."

"I'm glad of that."

"Why?"

"And you were the first man I'd been interested in," said Mrs. Chatillon, who added as an after-thought: "for ever so long."

"Is that so?"

"It is so."

"Am I not right in assuming that you have a husband?"

Mrs. Chatillon made a gesture of annoyance; Quillian saw that he had blundered.

"So it was almost another instance of Adam and Eve!" she went on.

"I wasn't aware that Eve gave Adam well-meant advice," he returned.

"I dare say she did at first—to put him off his guard."

"I certainly thought a lot of everything you said."

"That was very nice of you."

"Speaking to a woman was a startling adventure for me."

"And I forgot everything about you."

"Naturally."

"I came in for a lot of money I did not want, and was wondering what I should do with it. Yes, I forgot everything about you until I saw you fondling a little girl in the Park."

"It was quite a surprise seeing you."

"You made a human picture."

"You have no children?"

"No," said Mrs. Chatillon shortly.

There was a suspicion of tenseness in the silence that followed, during which Mrs. Chatillon's eyes (they were ever fixed on Quillian) seemed to uncloze.

"Pity one can't buy them at the Stores, like one can other things," she went on.

"Oh!"

"No, it isn't. It could never be the same."

"It must be a great deprivation for people who are married to be childless," he remarked.

"You think so?"

"I think so."

"Perhaps not at first; but, after——"

There was a further silence; and there came into Quillian's mind a recollection of how Vesper as a girl had shed bitter tears at a certain palmist's forecast.

"Is it true you're going to be married?" asked Mrs. Chatillon.

"How did you know?"

"Hemmingay told me. Then it's true!"

"Y-yes."

"Why did you say 'yes' like that; as if you weren't over sure?"

"I wasn't aware that I did."

"Don't you love her?"

"I—I think so," said Quillian, who could not deny that Mercia had not been very much in his thoughts since Vesper had spoken her mind.

"Surely you're not such an arrant fool as to marry a woman you don't love body and soul from some ridiculous motive of knight errantry!"

"How do you mean?"

"So many men get friendly with a girl, and propose, not because he wants her, but because she cares for him;

or he's gone too far to draw back; or some silly reason of that sort. Thousands of marriages—perhaps the large proportion of unhappy marriages—are made in some way like that.”

“I did what I did with my eyes open,” declared Quillian.

Apparently Mrs. Chatillon did not hear, for she went on, and with some approach to warmth:

“Let me tell you this: that it's the greatest mistake imaginable to act unselfishly in the great issues of life—the small ones, too, for that matter. Quite apart from the fact of one's getting no appreciation, things nearly always go wrong. I've found that out in my own life; and I know I'm not alone.”

“Don't most people usually consider themselves?” returned Quillian quietly.

“No. Not when they're young and unhardened, and under the influence of some religious belief. Take your case——”

“I told you I did what I did with my eyes open.”

“Are you still of the same mind?”

“I hope so,” said Quillian, with all the confidence he could muster.

“Assuming you would have me believe what you say, you don't look very happy over it.”

“Everyone has setbacks in life.”

“Hasn't she written during the last three days?”

“It's not that.”

“Worried because this wretched committee is already overdue?”

“I'm used to that.”

“Why is Miss Hemmingay so interested in you?”

Quillian almost started from his seat.

“Is she?” he asked quickly.

“Obviously.”

“How?”

“She went out of her way to find out how I came to know you.”

“That was some time back!” all but sighed Quillian.

“What of that!”

Quillian did not reply, whereupon Mrs. Chatillon repeated her question.

"I—I think she's too taken up with Lord Tayne to have any further interest in me," replied Quillian evasively.

"I'm sorry for Tayne!"

"Sorry!" cried Quillian sharply.

"Yes. Apart from her bad temper and the bad time she'll probably give him, the marriage of an elderly man with a girl is the nemesis of the man who has 'lived his life.'"

"V—Miss Hemmingay bad tempered!"

"You should have seen her face when I told her you were an old friend of mine, as I took leave to do. And about this marriage——"

"You agree it's wrong!"

"Most certainly, for Tayne."

"Women always take the man's part!"

"Naturally. I take yours at the committee meetings, and——"

"But about this marriage——"

"What are you doing after this meeting is over?"

"But——"

"You can come back with me to luncheon."

"Thank you," said Quillian, who was thankful for the respite from his pain promised by Mrs. Chatillon's company.

"I have to thank you—and for taking me out of myself."

"Is that so?"

"So we're both of the same mind," she smiled. "Do you like good orchestral music?"

"Yes."

"Then you can take me to a concert I've tickets for at Queen's Hall, if you've nothing better to do!"

"But——"

"Don't you want to?"

"It's not that. I was going to ask you if—if you wouldn't be seeing too much of me!"

"I don't think so," she rejoined quietly.

A silence, the significance of which was apparent even

to Quillian's distressed thoughts, was broken by the ringing of the telephone bell.

Quillian put out his hand for the receiver; he was forestalled by Mrs. Chatillon, who said:

"You've quite enough to bother about. I'll see who it is."

"Yes, Mr. Quillian is here," she said in reply to whomsoever was speaking. "I can give him any message. I'm Mrs. Chatillon." And then, after hearing what was said, she returned: "Mr. Hemmingay may be half an hour late, as he's detained on some important business! Mr. Quillian is here with me, so I won't fail to tell him. Good-bye!"

"Was that Hemmingay?" asked Quillian.

"His charming daughter," returned the other dryly.

"Then——"

"What!"

"Nothing."

Mrs. Chatillon smiled; sighed; and proceeded to survey herself in the dingy glass on the mantelpiece.

Meantime, Quillian was reflecting how the stars in their courses were fighting against him in things both small and big: here was he hoping against hope that Vesper might put in some sort of appearance at the belated committee meeting; now this slender possibility was most likely destroyed by the fact of the telephone being answered by a woman to whom the former, from some feminine whim, had taken a dislike: if Vesper could not make up her mind with regard to attending, the knowledge that Mrs. Chatillon would be there would doubtless stop her from coming.

Quillian knew a further sinking of spirit; this was, perhaps, the reason why he turned to Mrs. Chatillon, and said:

"You meant it, didn't you?"

"Meant what?"

"That I should spend the day with you!"

"Of course," she returned, and as if surprised by his question. "Why?"

"I only wanted to make certain."

Mrs. Chatillon left the mantelpiece, and advancing

upon Quillian, made as if she would put her arms upon his shoulder: her intention was defeated by the entrance of two members of the committee, who were followed at varying intervals by one or another of that inconsiderable fraction which had made up its mind to be present.

If Quillian had not been so taken up with Vesper's early marriage to Lord Tayne, he would have suffered a measure of disillusionment on account of the vagaries of the majority of those who had volunteered to give their services to further the cause the promoters were presumed to have at heart.

They were for the most part garrulous, queerly dressed, cranky folk, who, for all their professions of doing good, were, on the face of it, more concerned to listen to the music of their own voices; to push their own particular nostrum; above all, to scrape acquaintance with their social betters, than to further the object for which they were gathered together.

There were exceptions, but the quiet-spoken, single-hearted men and women who made up this minority were nearly always overborne by their noisy fellows.

And conspicuous amongst each and all of these was Mrs. Chatillon for her atmosphere of well-bred distinction; her self-possession; her sound common sense, and, if the need arose, for a delicate gift of irony: doubtless these qualities obtained more recognition than they might otherwise have done owing to her wealth and her unassailable social foothold.

Otherwise, the biggest gun was Sir Sylvester Meale, the millionaire, free trading (in theory) protected chocolate magnate: in appearance, he was a stoutly built, consequential, bearded man, who suggested God-fearing—successful—wholesale grocer; he had a nonconformist affability for all sorts and sundry, which largely consisted of affectionately patting on the backs whomsoever he might be talking to.

He was narrowly sincere in his many efforts for the moral and spiritual uplifting of the less happily placed of his species; gave away vast sums yearly in the furtherance of these; was an advanced radical in politics; and from his large contributions to the party funds, and his

opposition to the strengthening of Imperial bands, had received a baronetcy; and while being in the journalistic van of the crusade against the iniquity of landlords and the privileges of the Lords, he was greedily counting on a peerage in the near future: he loved the society of his social betters; the sight of a regiment of soldiers nearly made him retch.

Then there was a Mrs. Corner, a 'find' of Mrs. Nosworthy's, who, in season and out, still insisted on the necessity of winning Royal patronage for the scheme.

Mrs. Corner was a large, ill-corseted, untidy-haired, dressed-anyhow woman, whose enthusiasm in the cause of humanity made her neglect her husband, home, and large family of children who were reputed to live on eggs and tinned fruit in their neglected South Kensington home: she spent her days and nights on endless committees for all sorts and kinds of social betterment, where she mostly had her way on account of her unlimited flow of words.

Quillian had never thought it possible for a woman to talk as this Mrs. Corner: sentences seemed to fall from her loose lips like a torrent; and whether or no she spoke sense, there was no denying that her gift of the gab wore down the most obstinate opposition.

Amongst those who were a help to Quillian was a man named Stonecross; he was clean-shaven; kindly looking; had a profusion of grey hair; big features; and was not unlike a sweet-faced toy: he was a Civil servant; such was his passion for work, which was apparently not satisfied by the performance of his official duties, that he devoted his two months' vacation to putting his shoulder to the wheel of some overworked philanthropic society: he had a gift of organization, and Quillian did not know what he would have done without him.

One whom Quillian could not make out at all was a wizened, odd-looking, elderly man named Gisby.

He took next to no part in the deliberations of the committee; did not appear to know why he was there; and should his opinion be asked on any point, he would suggest that a solution might be found by a possible parallel in the ways of animals or birds.

On an occasion that Quillian had found himself alone with Gisby, the latter had informed him that the world would never be put right until mankind altered its habits.

Upon Quillian asking what he meant, the other had replied that men and women should follow the example of the birds; go to bed winter and summer at the same time that they roosted; and should eat the simplest food from the ground with their fingers: he added that he was making up his mind whether or no it would be a good thing for a man to choose a new mate every spring.

Quillian, who had been in a flippant mood just then (Vesper had attended the committee, and had glanced at him more than once), had ventured to ask if it were necessary to sleep with one leg on a perch, whereupon Gisby had gravely declared that that very useful accomplishment might be picked up with practise.

Quillian did not know whether to regard him as a crank or a subtle humorist.

The committee proceeded on its tiresome way, tiresome, because there was endless discussion on trivialities in which Mrs. Corner was, as usual, to the fore; Quillian, so far as he was able, sought to bend his mind to everything that was toward; this was no easy matter since he was distressed by the collapse of his hopes regarding Vesper's coming.

He was very grateful for the consolation provided by Mrs. Chatillon's companionship, but from the bottom of his heart he wished she had not answered the telephone.

If he had insisted on doing so himself, he kept on repeating, he would not only have had word with Vesper, but a sight of her might have lightened his burden of care.

He could not understand at all why Vesper should have taken such a dislike to Mrs. Chatillon, but he was now sufficiently acquainted with the eternal feminine to know it was prone to freakish whims and unjustifiable impulses.

Then, in the midst of a heated, if not an acrimonious, discussion with regard to the particular religious doctrine

which would be most helpful in reforming rescued fallen women, a discussion to which Quillian paid unpardonable heed, Hemmingay arrived with profuse apologies for his lateness: thereupon Quillian fell to thinking that, had he but spoken at the telephone, Vesper in all likelihood would have accompanied her father, and would be now in the same room.

Once more he was thankful he was spending the rest of the day with Mrs. Chatillon: he excused himself for dependence on another, and a woman, to lessen the anguish in his heart, instead of stoutly fighting his own battle, by telling himself that, by accepting this respite, he would be better able to fix his mind on the work of the committee.

Notwithstanding this reflection, Quillian's thoughts were much taken up with Vesper, and with how she had looked on divers occasions of that memorable day in Richmond Park: they would have been entirely, had not Hemmingay addressed him.

"My daughter rang you up this morning," he said.

"She did," almost sighed Quillian.

"Did you speak to her?"

"I was in the room."

"I spoke to her," said Mrs. Chatillon.

"Ah! Did she mention that the ball that was to be given for a certain purpose is now to be given for the funds of the 'Home'?"

"Is that so?"

"As a matter of fact, I've resigned my duties at the hospital. I wish to devote all my energies to this. And we found that er—er—our present scheme commands far more support in likely quarters than the 'Princess Royal.' I thought Vesper may have mentioned it."

Quillian made no comment on the dubiousness of this proceeding; he merely reflected it was of a piece with Hemmingay's methods of business, before once more regretting he had not spoken with Vesper.

He was still woolgathering, when the proceedings came to an end; those who had been present departed in two's and three's, and again Quillian found himself alone with Mrs. Chatillon.

" Shall we go ?" he said.

" Wait a little, if you don't mind."

" Why should I mind ?"

" I don't want to run into any of the others: they've bored me quite enough as it is for one day."

" I wonder you bother to come at all !"

" Do you ?"

" It wasn't as if you had no other resources."

" Perhaps I haven't."

" You don't expect me to believe that !"

Mrs. Chatillon smiled.

It was rarely her commonly serious face lightened in this way; when it did, she was as one transfigured; she appeared ever so young; and there was an appealing sweetness about and below her eyes.

" What are you looking at ?" she asked.

" Why ? You look so different—if I may say so."

" So I would always be if—if—— "

" If what !"

" If I were as happy as I was meant to be. But who is ? You're not; I'm not: and there it is."

They stayed talking for some minutes longer; as they were on the point of going, they heard the door of the outer office open, and the sound of a feminine voice which thrilled Quillian to the marrow.

Then Vesper appeared, and with a flush on her face, and with eyes aglow with excitement.

" There you are," she remarked offhandedly to Quillian: she ignored Mrs. Chatillon.

" Good-morning," Quillian forced himself to say.

" I've a message from father. I'm going out for the day, and he asked me to bring it on my way."

" I've already seen him," faltered Quillian.

" H—have you ?"

" He came to the meeting. Didn't you know ?"

" Anyway, he said he'd be in all the afternoon and evening as—as he wanted to tell you something about that—that ball."

" I think he explained to-day—— "

" I—I don't suppose he knew he was coming when he asked me to give his message."

"And in any case, Mr. Quillian is not free to-day," interposed Mrs. Chatillon.

"Oh!" from Vesper.

"He's engaged to me."

Vesper was silent; changed colour; made as if she would speak to Quillian; and then hastened from the room.

"How obvious!" was Mrs. Chatillon's comment.

"In what way?"

"We are, indeed, the obvious sex."

"In what way was Miss Hemmingay obvious?"

"If you can't see, I'm not so foolish as to enlighten you," rejoined Mrs. Chatillon.

CHAPTER XXII

THE LUCKIEST GIRL IN LONDON

"WHAT is it, Mrs. Gassmann?"

"I won't stop if you don't want to see me, sir."

"If it's anything I can do for you——"

"I wasn't going to ask fur anything, sir."

"I'm sure of that."

"I called in to have a word with Grumby, sir, and hearing you was in, and alone, I took the liberty of telling you that Gassmann's last hours 'ave come."

"Indeed!"

"That they 'ave, sir," declared Mrs. Gassmann, and not uncheerfully.

"I'm very sorry to hear that."

"An' I 'eard from his sister at Walworth that 'er 'usband's going to be took too."

"Oh!"

"If it were 'ee-cancers, the doctor said he'd get over it; but it's she-cancers, an' that means Alice 'll soon be a widder."

"About your husband——"

"It's truth what I'm tellin' you, sir. Gassmann's got death round his eyes and nose, an' he can't last much longer. I lay awake at night a-listening for the rattle."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to get my Annie's violet dress dyed black as soon as I can get it out of pawn, and——"

"Couldn't I help you?" interrupted Quillian.

"Thank you, sir, but I take no money over what I earn," truthfully declared Mrs. Gassmann.

"I think all the more of you for that. But what are you doing for your husband?"

"I sit by 'is bedside, an' trim my mourning 'at."

"Is that very considerate?"

"Considerate! Gassmann likes it. 'Ee says it cheers 'im up. I'm so nimble wif my fingers, 'ee ses."

"Perhaps you're mistaken. You were before, you know."

"Not this time, sir. Gassmann was so bad this morning, I called in Sally Blows."

"Indeed!"

"Sally 'ad a good look at 'im——"

"And what did she say?" asked Quillian, who was beginning to weary of these morbid confidences.

"'You keep up' is Insurance money, Sarey Gassmann! That's what Sally Blows said."

Mrs. Gassmann shortly took her leave; before she went, Quillian pressed assistance upon her towards the expenses of her husband's illness; she stoutly refused to accept anything, and declared that while she had a pair of arms, Gassmann should want for nothing.

Alone, Quillian once more surrendered to thoughts that had been interrupted by the charwoman's appearance; these were more than ordinarily gloomy, since it was the night of the ball for the funds of the 'Home,' a ball both Vesper and Lord Tayne were to attend.

He had seen next to nothing of Vesper for the last few days; the references Hemmingay had all too frequently made to her doings for Quillian's peace of mind were concerned with social successes in the exalted circles to which her engagement to Tayne had obtained admittance.

Quillian could well believe this, but the apparent zest with which Vesper made use of her new-found opportunities somewhat shortened the pedestal he had placed her on.

Once more he recalled the words of the Guardian at Ypres regarding the devils (there were at least seven) which found a home in every beautiful woman's heart; while telling himself it was unthinkable that any of these were possessed by Vesper, he could not deny that the exalted estimate he had formed of her had suffered hurt.

She had told him she was ever so worldly; and he had not believed her; he had now some evidence that she had been speaking the truth.

He had expected that she would wear the mien of a martyr, who was being unwillingly led to a hymeneal sacrifice; and here she was seizing with both hands the good things which were the price of her spiritual undoing.

Yes, he was certainly disappointed in Vesper; yet, with his ever-present desire to put her behaviour in the best light, he told himself that it was he who was in darkness concerning her temptations; and was at fault for expecting too much of a callow girl who had been handicapped by her environment.

At all times, however, he was certain she was making a loveless match, with its infinite possibilities for disaster; upon its coming to do anything further of moment to save her, it was as though he were tied hand and foot.

And since he was so helpless; and since Vesper's enthusiasm, had it existed, for the 'White Slave' Rescue Home had been reduced to vanishing-point; Quillian, after much taking counsel with himself, had written that morning to Hemmingay and Tayne, to say that, for a variety of reasons it was unnecessary to go into, he wished to break his active association with the work; but that, since he was largely responsible for its beginnings, his resources were at their disposal to any reasonable amount.

As for what lay before him, he did not trouble over-much: there was the saintly Mercia somewhere in the background; and marriage with her in a more or less distant future might give him some of the happiness he so poorly deserved.

Yet, whatever happened, either now or then, there was no denying that the Guardian had spoken truly in saying that the secular life which would be his would be no light pilgrimage, but a narrow path bestrewn with obstacles: and that, if he obtained that for which he had been sent into the world, it would not be until after his heart had been grievously bruised; and that, a thousand times, he would long for the peace of the monastery.

It had not yet come to wishing himself back, although, more than once, and if steeped in a more than common bitterness of spirit, the thought of an ultimate return occurred to him.

If it had not been for Mercia, he might have gone deeper into the matter.

He was awakened from his brooding by the touch of a hand upon his arm: he looked up, and discovered Sister Jane at his elbow; she seemed plainer and older than when he had last seen her: she was wearing her attenuated Franciscan habit, signifying she belonged to the 'Third Order of Women' of that Society.

"I didn't hear you come in," said Quillian.

"Sit down. I shan't keep you long, as I suppose you'll be wanting to dress."

"Dress!"

"For the ball."

"I'm not going."

"Not?"

"I don't know how to dance; and if I did, I shouldn't care about going."

"Vesper, Jim—everyone is going."

"I can't help that," sighed Quillian.

"And how have you been all this long time?"

"Is it so long?"

"I haven't seen you since that day at my brother's."

"Haven't you?" he remarked absently.

"Had you forgotten?"

"One way and another I've had a good deal to think about."

"So have I."

"Working for Father Horan?"

"I've been more taken up with myself."

"A change," commented Quillian.

"No," from Sister Jane decidedly. "Anything but."

In reply to his sober glance of inquiry, she went on: "There are times, as now, when everything is forgotten but the saving of my soul."

Quillian was sympathetically silent: Sister Jane continued:

"To-morrow, or the next day, I'm going into a retreat for a time. I know it's selfish, but I can't help it."

"Selfish!"

"But you cannot conceive the blessedness of a temporary escape from the temptations to which a nature

such as mine is sometimes subject," declared Sister Jane, with more than a touch of passion in her voice.

"Is it you talking?" asked Quillian.

"Don't you know that my temperament, with its bias for devotion and certain forms of worldliness, is ever so common?"

"Indeed!"

"There's no occasion to go into it now. I came to apologize for the mean trick I played you that day I met you at my brother's."

"What mean trick?"

"Telling you James was going to marry Vesper. I knew you must know sooner or later, but it was no reason why you should have known that day. I did it on the spur of the moment, and was very sorry after."

Quillian did not reply, and she added: "I suppose the fact of the matter is that no woman was, is, or ever will be, a 'gentleman' at heart."

"As you say, I was bound to know it sooner or later," remarked Quillian gloomily.

"Still grieving?"

"What about?"

"James's marriage."

"Do you look upon it with—with satisfaction?"

Sister Jane made a gesture of indifference.

"Here is a man who is well past middle-age; a man who has what is known as 'lived his own life,' marrying a girl who is young enough to be his daughter; a girl who can by no remote possibility care for him: is that a marriage that can ever hope to be blessed?"

"I certainly think it's very foolish of James."

"What!" from Quillian.

"Women have always made a great fuss of him, and it seems very foolish to tie himself up."

"But—but——"

"And since he cares for her much more than she will ever for him, she's sure to find it out, and take every advantage of it."

"But—but—you're looking at it from his point of view?" exclaimed Quillian in dismay.

"Why not?" returned Sister Jane almost defiantly.

"I was forgetting he was your brother."

"And a man: don't forget that either. As for Vesper, if you ask my opinion, she's doing remarkably well for herself."

"She doesn't care for him. You seem to forget that!"

"Ask any well brought up girl in her position which she would sooner do: marry a poor man for what is called love; or my brother and all he can give her. And how much more is this the case with a young woman with a father like Hemmingay!"

"Still——"

"Still what?" said the other impatiently.

"Oh, you're all alike," cried Quillian in the bitterness of his spirit. "Here's a girl being sacrificed—for I know—I *know* she is; and not one of you will raise a finger to help her."

"Tell me this."

"Well?"

"Do you believe she would thank anyone who tried?"

"I—I——"

"If you don't think so, try it yourself."

"I—I have tried," admitted Quillian.

"How?" asked Sister Jane shortly.

"I—I spoke to her."

"With what result?"

"Perhaps—perhaps you are right," he sighed.

"I know I am. Let well alone, my friend, and never seek to advise people unasked. We all know—or think we know—what is best for ourselves."

"Perhaps—perhaps you are right."

"And having had my say, I'll take myself off."

"Let me see you down."

"Before I forget it, let me give you this," said Sister Jane, and producing a book.

"What is it?"

"Keats."

"Poetry!"

"I've no business to have it, so thought I'd give it to you."

"Thank you."

"Although I suppose I'll buy another copy when I come out. That's the sixth."

"I won't promise I'll read it."

"It's disturbing if one wants to lead the higher life. Don't come out. I've taken up too much of your time as it is."

She moved toward the door; Quillian was following, when Grumby appeared and said:

"Excuse me, sir——"

"What is it?" from Quillian.

"A lady to see you."

"What!"

"A lady to see you, sir."

"Who?" asked Quillian quickly.

"She didn't give no name, sir. If I were asked to describe her, I should say 'the flesh.' Come in evening dress, sir," said Grumby, who gravely shook his head, and added: "The flesh."

"Did she give any name?"

"No, sir."

"Has she been here before?"

"Once. Come with her father; who borrowed half a crown to pay the cabman. That was the feast-day of St. Cyprian."

Quillian had dared to suspect who it was directly he had heard a lady wished to see him; now there was no doubt of her identity, he said, and believed he was voicing his heart:

"I can't see her."

"Very good, sir," from Grumby.

"At least, I will for a moment. Show her in."

Grumby left the room; Quillian, so far as his agitation would permit at this wholly unlooked-for coming of Vesper's, regretted he was dressed anyhow to receive her.

"You know who it is, then?" said Sister Jane.

"I guessed."

"If, as I suppose, it's Vesper Hemmingay, it will please her to find me here."

"How do you mean?" asked Quillian, who scarcely knew what he was saying.

"I wasn't aware it was usual for young women who're

engaged to be married to visit young bachelors at night in their flats."

"It may be something urgent—it may——"

His effort to explain her coming was interrupted by the entrance of Vesper, who looked radiant in a cloak of rose brocade edged with ermine; and with a deep hem of black pan velvet: there was a ruffle of rose-flowered ninon about her shapely neck, and a spray of white osprey in her hair.

She carried an ivory-white ostrich-feather fan.

She came into the room as one held by a dominating purpose; and seemed greatly surprised at finding the sister of the man to whom she was betrothed.

"You!" she exclaimed.

"Why not?" returned Sister Jane quietly.

"If—if I had known——"

"You wouldn't have come. But you needn't let that interfere with your visit."

There was a slight silence, broken by Sister Jane, who added:

"And in case you're worried at finding me here, I won't mention it to my brother."

"Please yourself," replied Vesper disdainfully.

"And as I'm in the way, I'll go now."

"Please don't," said Quillian, as she moved towards the door.

"You wish me to stay?"

"Please."

"Here?"

"Would you mind waiting in another room?"

"For how long?"

"Until Miss Hemmingay goes. It would be better if you would."

"Since you wish it," said Sister Jane.

She did not go at once; she turned and steadfastly regarded the fine figure made by Vesper in her superb evening clothes.

And as Quillian glanced from one to the other (it must be admitted his gaze lingered longer on Vesper), it seemed to him that Vesper in her shining youth, and in the pride begotten of purple and fine linen; and the middle-aged,

plain woman, who was wearing her attenuated Franciscan garment, symbolical of her anxiety for her soul's welfare, respectively stood for what Grumby had called the 'flesh,' and for the life of otherworldliness: he could not deny, and the admission pricked his conscience, which made the deeper appeal.

Quillian was alone with Vesper: he was thankful at having her all to himself.

She was the first to speak.

"Well——" she said, and with a feverish assumption of lightheartedness.

"Well!" he nervously returned, for want of something better to say.

"Are you surprised to see me?"

"Surprised!" he echoed.

"After our—our disagreement. Perhaps I said more than I should; but I realized after you did it for my good."

Before Quillian could comprehend the welcome fact that his prolonged griefs at the way she had turned on him, and the rancour appearing to underlie her upbraidings, were so much wasted sorrow, she went on:

"I suppose you're shocked?"

"Shocked!"

"At my coming like this: and running the risk of insult from an unscrupulous man like you. You see, I know whom I have to deal with."

"Anyway, it's as well 'Sister Jane' is here," remarked Quillian feebly: more than once he believed he was in a dream world; that any moment he might awake to his unutterable loneliness.

"That for Sister Jane!" cried Vesper disdainfully.

"But——"

"If I want to do a thing, I do it. All the Sister Janes in the world wouldn't stop me."

Quillian looked at her proud eyes; the thin dilating nostrils; and quivering lips: and could well believe her.

"How long has she been here?" asked Vesper.

"I scarcely know: not long."

"I should have been here long ago, only the driver was drunk, or stupid, or something. Now I must go."

Although Quillian was every moment more aware of the risks she was running at visiting him like this, he was dismayed by this announcement, and showed it in his face.

"Don't you want me to go?" she hazarded.

"I want to have one more look at you," he said, and in a voice that seemed to come from a distance.

"Then I must go. I'd no idea of coming; but I dressed early (it's the first decent evening frock I've ever worn), and then I wasn't sure if you were coming; and I suddenly wanted you to see how I looked!"

So saying, and with an undercurrent of effort in her lightheartedness, she put down her fan, slipped off her cloak (she gave it to him to hold), and stood before him in all the glory of mauve charmeuse, with corsage of flesh-coloured ninon, and trimmed with pearl edging at the sleeves and neck.

The frock was caught up on one side with the pearl trimming, and here was a large chiffon rose which seemed to blush at the lace petticoat revealed beneath.

Quillian gently put down the cloak that had caressed her body; and confronting her, glanced from her pale pink shoes to the osprey spray in her hair, and riveted his gaze on her eyes; and as they looked into her's, he was dimly aware of the fact that all his concern for her welfare was being merged into a desire for lifelong ownership of this glowing young woman.

This aspiration was no sooner formulated than he put it out of his mind with all the resolution he could muster: it was as though he realized the shattering blow which would be dealt to the structure of his whole mental outlook should his anxiety on Vesper's behalf be capable of an explanation other than the one he had stoutly held to.

"Well——" she said.

"Thank you," was all he replied.

"For letting you see my frock!"

"For coming and proving you're not offended. It means so much to me."

"Offended?"

"For what I said the other day."

"Surely you haven't taken that to heart!" (His care-

lined face told her that he had.) "And if you were so foolish as to think twice about it, you surely remembered what someone said about us—'That we women are angels in our wrongs; devils to get our rights'!"

"To tell you the truth, I—I did rather grieve."

"I'm sorry."

"I—I thought—was sure you would never forgive me."

"It would take more than that to upset me—now."

And before he could say anything, she went on:

"See how lucky I am! My name's in all the papers; they'd have had me, too, if only I cared about sending my photographs. All sorts of people have congratulated me: and when I'm married, I shall be able to 'live' at last. Why! I'm called the luckiest girl in London!"

"So long as you're of the same mind——"

"And the people who've taken me up," she interrupted, and with a more apparent effort of lightheartedness. "There's an aunt of James's; she's ever such a somebody; and she makes a great fuss of me. I don't mind telling you that, at heart, she doesn't like me one bit; and has only taken me up to spite her sister, who dislikes me even more. Still, so long as I score, what does it matter?"

"Vesper! Vesper!"

He unwittingly made use of her Christian name.

"Well!"

"That isn't you speaking."

"Isn't it?" she laughed lightly.

"I know it isn't you."

She looked at him with a steadfast seriousness for a second, before continuing as before:

"You think me different from anybody else; and you're wrong. But then you're different from other men; and I suppose that accounts for it. And that reminds me, you didn't congratulate me when you heard of my engagement. If it hadn't been for that cat of a 'Sister Jane,' you wouldn't have heard of it just when I didn't want you to. All the same, you didn't congratulate me; and I've thought about it a lot. Why didn't you?"

"Why didn't I?" he echoed.

Perhaps she perceived the anguish in his voice, for, at

that moment, she lost much of her forced cheerfulness, and looked helplessly about her, and anywhere than at Quillian.

"Now I must go," she resumed in a level-headed voice. "I—I should never have come, and I've stayed too long as it is."

He stoutly resisted an insane desire to plead to her to stay; and merely said:

"You will soon get back in a taxi."

"I see you want to be rid of me, so I'll be off."

She reached for the ostrich-feather fan she had brought with her; and turned with evident reluctance towards the door: as she did so, she caught sight of the slim volume of Keats which Sister Jane had left.

"What's that?" she exclaimed sharply, and put down the fan.

"Verse," he returned.

"How did that get here? You needn't tell me: it was that Mrs. Chatillon who gave it to you!"

He perceived the underlying scorn with which she referred to his friend; before he could tell her she was mistaken, she glanced at the title-page, and went on:

"It's perfectly disgraceful the way that woman runs after you!"

"Vesper!" he protested.

"And you ought to know better than to allow it!"

"Vesper! Vesper!"

"Did I say you could call me by that name! Everyone on the committee is talking of how thick you are together."

He ignored this scandal-mongering, and said:

"Sister Jane brought that book for me this evening."

"Swear?"

"Isn't my word enough?" he asked.

"Of course," she returned almost gently. "And that shows you what we women are: always suspicious; and always in the wrong."

"And as for Mrs. Chatillon——"

"Never mind her—now. I hate the sight of her. And I know you too well to think that you'd run after

an old thing like her, although I believe young men like middle-aged women!"

This was said with a note of inquiry in her voice: he was debating, so far as he was capable of coherent thought, what he should reply, when she went off at a tangent, to say:

"I wrote verses once."

"I can well believe that."

"And, as you can imagine, it was ever so long ago, before—before—— There was one to daffodils, I remember. I called it 'My Lady Daffodil,' and it began—— Do you like daffodils?"

"Who doesn't?"

"Were they over before you came to England?"

"Yes. But we had them in Belgium. They grew in the garden of our monastery; and about the city for miles," said Quillian, who suddenly found his tongue. "It was like a sea of gold. For those who were born in the spring, they were the first flowers they saw; and for those who passed away then, the last they knew: I've always loved them."

She was fascinated by the passion in his voice until she said:

"I'm glad you like them. They suit me."

"I can believe that, too."

"And—and—if you like, I'll put some in my hair in the spring, and—and—just think once of you!"

"A halo of gold!"

"Halos aren't for sinners. But wasn't it you who said I was like a stained-glass saint in your old chapel?"

"In our chapel of St. Bernardine. She's St. Teresa. I can see her now with the sunlight streaming through her hair," he declared; and added after looking hard at Vesper: "So like: so very like!"

She quailed beneath his glance, and said with a return to her artificial cheerfulness:

"Thank goodness I'm not a saint at heart. Appearance is quite enough for me. No pretty frocks; no pretty anything; no smart wedding; and no having 'no end' of a good time."

"Vesper! Vesper! Don't speak like that!"

"Why shouldn't I if it's true?" she returned defiantly.

"I know it isn't true in your case."

"How do you know? No man ever knows women. They don't even know themselves. Don't be angry with me. Let me be happy, if only while I'm here."

He moved away to the fireplace, and said:

"I know it isn't true, because, if I hadn't faith in you, I should believe in nothing; and then there would be no meaning in life."

"Oh!"

"Whatever you may say, whatever you may do, nothing will ever convince me, at heart, you're not a woman any man who was worthy the name would not thank God for."

"That's—that's very nice of you," she said in a voice that came unsteadily from quivering lips.

He gazed at her with infinitely tender eyes; perhaps, it was in order to escape their message, that she said:

"What do you think of my fan?"

"It's a very beautiful fan," he remarked, as she handled it for a moment, before tossing it on a side table.

"Don't you want to know who gave it to me?"

"I can guess."

"He showers things on me."

"Naturally."

"Naturally!"

"It's a privilege," said Quillian simply.

Vesper was momentarily silent, before continuing, and with a return to her unconvincing lightheartedness:

"Still, what does it matter, or anything else? It's all the same in a hundred years: and, meantime, I'm the luckiest girl in London. Only you're the one person who doesn't, or won't, see it. What's the use of worrying about anything? Eat, drink, and be merry, for to-morrow we grow old."

Her lightning change of mood brought about corresponding emotions in Quillian: one moment, he was comparatively in the skies; the following, he was down in the uttermost depths.

The next definite thing he was aware of was that

Vesper had thrown off simulation as she might a mantle, and had sunk helplessly on a chair.

He was all concern for her; approaching her, he cried: "Are you ill?"

She did not reply; and he added with an immense compassion:

"If you are, you must rest here; that is, if you can forgive me, since it's all my doing."

"No rest for me," she said in a low voice.

"What do you mean?"

"You—you thought so highly of me. And—and I wanted to be as you thought me; and—and—now——"

"Thank God! You're your true self!" he cried.

"You're not different from what I thought you. You couldn't be."

Quillian knew a sadly sweet satisfaction in discovering that the worldliness that had cut him to the quick had been all put on: he was deeply thankful that, at heart, she had not been tarnished by her association with her father; and yet cast down at realizing that this pearl above price was to be sold in the marriage market.

"I've been miserable ever since," she went on. "I wanted you to think well of me for ever and always, and to-night it seemed to get hold of me. I felt I must see you; so I dressed early and came. I believe I wanted you to go for me, as then I could have gone away laughing; laughing at you; laughing at everything. Perhaps it would have been better if you'd been ever so horrid. It's so dreadful when you meet someone you want to be your best before, and one's not, and knows it, and they're just as nice to you. And as you're not going to be nasty, I'll go. Indeed, I should never have come."

He was silent—indeed, he could not have spoken then if he had tried.

"And whatever you think of me, please, please, please don't think I came to show off that rotten frock," she said. "I believe in my heart of hearts all I wanted was your blessing."

Quillian scarcely heard these last words; since he had received confirmation of his suspicions that she was not a willing partner to the bargain that had been made, all

the old frantic passion to save her from the consequences of the act she contemplated again took possession of him: the miserable results of his last effort were as forgotten as though it had never been; and he was revolving a hundred mad schemes in his brain: the most promising of these appeared to be the making of an appeal to Lord Tayne.

Perhaps he was not wholly lost to sanity, for, as if seeking for some encouragement from her, he cried:

"If you would let me save you!"

"Oh no. It's gone too far now. Besides, you couldn't."

"Up till now I've been weak, because I feared to make things worse, and make you angry. Now I see what you are, I'm ever so strong. And—and I could speak to Tayne——"

She perceived a tentative note in this suggestion, and said with some decision:

"No: he's good and kind at heart: not that. It must go on: and I don't mind so long as you understand."

"But——"

"It's no use, believe me. But you're different from everyone else I've met; and I want you to think well of me. I'm not quite hopeless; not altogether. But I've never had a chance. Only trouble; trouble; trouble: just groping along: sometimes getting a glimpse of better things: losing it again; and trusting to luck."

Her belief in him; the knowledge that he was, at least, something to her, did much to sweep away the mists of make-believe with which he had almost automatically surrounded himself where she was concerned: it would have needed very little encouragement from her for him to have urged her to throw discretion to the winds and let him take her away and settle money on her so she could be free of her father and his influences.

At least, this is what he told himself was in his mind; at the back of his understanding was an unformulated thought that, somehow or another, he could forget all about Mercia and win Vesper for his own.

He was thinking of proposing some such means of escape, when she rose from her seat, almost scrambled into her cloak, and made for the door.

Her resolution unnerved him.

"Going!" he faltered.

"Of course. I was mad to come."

"Good-bye!"

"You can see me out."

She waited for him; and as he reached her, their hands met: perhaps she wished to do something to comfort him, or acted on impulse, for, upon his gently seeking to withhold her, she pressed his unresisting hand to her heart, before touching the tops of his fingers with her lips.

She led him as she might a child towards the outer door, where they saw outlined upon the coloured glass the figure of a man who was waiting without.

CHAPTER XXIII

A HOME-THRUST

THEY withdrew into the hall as Grumby entered it from the kitchen to answer the ring at the bell.

"Don't go for a moment," said Quillian (he still had hold of Vesper's hand). "I want Sister Jane."

"She's reading in the dining-room, sir."

"When I've taken this lady there, show whoever it is into my study; that is, if he insists on seeing me."

"Very good, sir."

"Don't forget—the study, if he insists on seeing me," admonished Quillian; he was well aware how easily Grumby muddled things.

Aglow from head to heel from the pressure of Vesper's lips to his fingers, Quillian took Vesper into the severely furnished dining-room, where Sister Jane was intent on a devotional book.

"I heard a ring; isn't it lucky she's gone?" said Sister Jane without looking up.

"She's not gone."

"Not I!" cried Sister Jane.

"And someone's at the door. She was just going, and we saw him outside."

"Who?"

"Grumby will tell us directly."

"Supposing it's my brother!"

"It can't be," said Vesper, whose face betrayed anxiety at having to delay a departure that was long overdue.

"Why can't it be?"

"Father is taking me to the Whitehall Rooms. We were to meet there. It can't be."

"Unless——" from Quillian.

"Unless what?" asked Vesper sharply.

"He's come about a letter I wrote about giving up work in the 'Home.'"

"When did you post it?"

"This morning."

"Then he may have come——"

The entrance of Grumby prevented the completion of the sentence—a Grumby who annoyed Quillian by showing in his manner he was conscious that something delicate was afoot.

He came in, closed the door, and said:

"Lord Tayne, sir."

"You showed him into the study?"

"Yes, sir. He said he must see you——"

"Thank you. That's all, Grumby."

Grumby left the room; Quillian would have followed, but was detained by Sister Jane, who said:

"Better let me come."

"Why?"

"To see it's safe for Miss Hemmingay to go."

"But——"

"I can manage better than you. It will never do for him to know she's here."

"You won't stay long!" urged Quillian.

"Why?"

"Never mind."

"You won't say anything of what we were talking about?" admonished Vesper.

"Why not?"

"Please, please, for my sake. I'm sensible now——"

Quillian heard no more; he had hurriedly left the room with Sister Jane.

He found Lord Tayne awaiting him in the room Vesper had quitted, a room that seemed very desolate since it had been robbed of her presence.

"Evening!" said Tayne on seeing Quillian. "Hullo, Jane!"

"I happened to be with Mr. Quillian," returned Sister Jane.

"Consoling each other for our frivolity?"

"Perhaps."

"If it hadn't been for Vesper, this ball is quite the

last thing in the world I should have gone to. Sort of preliminary run in harness after being out to grass for so long."

"A little discipline won't hurt you," said Sister Jane.

"You're not coming to-night, Quillian?"

"No."

"Not in your line?"

"No."

"Thought not. That's why I came about your letter. Didn't like to leave it, as I thought you might be running off somewhere."

"There's not much fear of that at present," declared Quillian grimly.

"Glad to hear it, as we may be able to make you change your mind." Turning to his sister, Tayne went on: "I don't know if Quillian's told you, but he wrote to me and said he'd clear out of this 'White Slave' business so far as active help was concerned."

"He did mention something of the sort to me."

"That's why I've come and interrupted your other-worldly chat. I want to see if I can persuade him to change his mind."

"I'll leave you together, and you can have it out," said Sister Jane, who thereupon made for the door.

"Going?" asked her brother.

"Soon."

"Why not wait here?"

"I left a book behind me, and——"

"Unless you want to meet one or two other keen philanthropists, I should clear off at once."

"What do you mean?"

"On the spur of the moment, I telephoned to Mrs. Nosworthy, Meale, Mrs. Chatillon, and Mrs. Corner, to tell them of Quillian's decision. It's more than possible that one or two of 'em 'll turn up."

"Now?"

"Any moment. Why, what's up?"

"What should be, as you call it, 'up'? I'll leave you two alone," said Sister Jane, who looked significantly at Quillian before leaving the room.

While they had been talking, Quillian had barely

listened: his one and only thought had been how to save Vesper, who had revealed the immensity of her worth, from giving her hand where she could not bestow her heart.

The need for caution, for bearing in mind her injunction at leaving her, the fact of the whole thing being really no concern of his, were all forgotten in the flood of zeal for what he called her ultimate welfare, which had swept him from off his feet, and into deeps where reason, even everyday common sense, did not obtain.

He was of the stuff of which martyrs are made; and did not count the cost in a cause in the righteousness of which he was convinced.

A few hours' sober reflection might have done him a world of good, and cooled his hot-headedness, that was all the more formidable as he was borne on the wave of a reaction from his dull resignation to the trend of events.

And (he interpreted this as the interference of Providence) the instrument for his purposes had come ready to hand in the appearance of Lord Tayne.

He was, moreover, dimly sensible of the fact that, since others might arrive on the same errand as Tayne's at any moment, Vesper could not escape from the flat: the knowledge of her presence diminished what little self-control he may have had, and sharpened his suspense; factors which urged him to rush into the breach, and either win a thrilling victory or pitifully fail.

"Hope you don't mind my coming," began Tayne.

"On the contrary——"

"If you'd taken my advice, you wouldn't have touched it from the first; but having begun it, and spent so much money, and the thing starting promisingly, indeed, more promisingly than ever I expected, it seems a pity not to go on with it."

"I told you, if it's a question of money, Lord Tayne——"

"Money be hanged! The 'Home' is so 'on the spot,' as it were, that it will probably go 'on its own.' And if it were a question of money, I would see it didn't come to grief. But, if I may say so, you're the only one

who takes it with proper seriousness; and it seems to me that if you drop out of it, there's no one to take your place."

Quillian was silent; and Tayne added:

"Those I took the liberty of telephoning to on the matter were quite of the same opinion."

Upon receiving no reply, he said:

"Can I do anything to persuade you to change your mind?"

"What you were talking about doesn't interest me at all," suddenly blurted Quillian.

"Indeed!"

"There is another matter that is ever so much more important, and which I must speak of without delay."

"Fire away!" returned the other, with a calmness that threw into relief Quillian's explosive determination.

"It—it concerns Miss Hemmingay!"

"Miss Hemmingay!" echoed Tayne sharply.

"I know you will tell me it's nothing to do with me, and to mind my own confounded business, or something of that sort. I know I've no right to interfere, but I can't see a rare nature like her's sacrificed."

"Sacrificed!"

"Sacrificed. For that is what it amounts to. And—and you must understand" (Quillian was nettled by the other's infernal self-possession and the ghost of a smile which came over his face), "it makes it very hard for me to speak after the kindness and consideration you have shown me."

"I wasn't aware of it."

"In advising me as you did."

"Since you appear to be humble-minded, there is hope for you——"

"Never mind that!"

"You don't let me finish! I suppose I should be very angry at your damned impertinence. I'm sorry not to fall in with your mood. I'm only amused."

"Amused!" cried Quillian, who was exasperated by the fact of Lord Tayne so lightly treating his efforts on Vesper's behalf.

"So far as I'm not amused, I'm grateful. I wasn't

aware I could come across such a delightful experience at fifty-five."

"Is that how you look at it?"

"And may I ask what I have done to get all this solicitude?"

"This marriage:—it's unholy; infamous! I know now that when you were giving the experience of a friend of yours, you were speaking of yourself. You as good as told me you were buying Miss Hemmingay."

"My dear young friend, take any couple you please. They start with a magnificent outfit of sentiment which they manage to run through in a very short time."

"You deny happiness in marriage. Then why——"

"You don't let me finish. Once they've got rid of their sentiment, they're in a condition of gentle indifference to each other, and are ever so happy. Should love be wanting on one side, isn't it half the battle towards the ideal of gentle indifference?"

"Is Miss Hemmingay to be an object-lesson in a cynical theory?"

"Hang it, man; wait till you're fifty-five and in love."

"I'm glad to hear that. Then you'll be considerate for her welfare."

"I wasn't aware I was doing so very much that wasn't," returned Tayne grimly.

"But if, as you admit, she doesn't care for you——"

"And don't you admit I've the patience of a Job in putting up with your infernal impudence?"

"As I told you, I'm aware it has really nothing to do with me——"

"But it has," interrupted Tayne calmly.

"How?"

"I'm coming to that directly; that is why I've put up with you as I have. As for your screed, one of the very few advantages of thousands of years of civilization has been to give women the right to dispose of themselves in marriage. Surely you're not going to tilt your lance against that?"

Quillian, conscious that he was by no means showing to the best advantage, and bitterly aware he had right

on his side, threw argument to the winds, and invoked abstract principles.

"The only thing I am tilting my lance against is the shame of any young woman being sold to the highest bidder, for that is what this amounts to," he cried. "And if she is, the bargain should not be veneered with such holy words as 'love,' 'honour,' and 'duty'."

"Those sentiments are surely more adapted for Hyde Park," urged Tayne.

"I made up my mind to appeal to you——"

"Entirely off your own bat?" interrupted Tayne, with some approach to anxiety.

"Of course."

"Ah! Go on."

"And since you only sneer at me, I must protest. I should never, never forgive myself if I didn't. Take away these things, and what have you left? Heavens! You'll deny the necessity of light and air next,—of things that give us hope of another life! Do you mean to tell me that the things poets have sung of in all ages are shams?"

"Certainly. One lie; many echoes; and the laughter of gods in the background."

"I can never think that, and—and——"

"Have you quite done?"

"But——"

"When you have, I've something to tell you."

"I—I should like to say this," said Quillian, who now that his first fine frenzy was exhausted, was beginning to suspect the rather sorry figure he cut: he was disposed to wish that Vesper was well out of the flat, so that there could be no immediate possibility of her hearing of what he had done. "About this 'White Slave' scheme. I do not know how much or how little you are interested. I only know this—that if you will not complete this bargain you have proposed, I will give every penny I possess—and it's really quite a lot of money, even as money is reckoned nowadays—to use it in any way you think fit to develop it. More, I will devote my life to making it a success, and I know how I could work if I had the incentive."

While he had been speaking, he had been more and more aware of the poor inducement he was offering; now he had done, he hoped against hope that it might carry some weight.

All he got, however, was:

"Do two blacks make one white, my young friend?"

"How do you mean?"

"You tell me I'm using my money to buy Miss Hemmingay. Now you're offering me more to go back on my word and make her look ridiculous to her many friends."

"Yes, but——"

"So far you've done all the talking, and I've listened with the most exemplary patience. It's my turn to have a say; and I wish to say this: that all the time you've been talking, you've been playing your own game for all you're worth."

"What!" from Quillian, who was not a little taken aback by the vehemence the other suddenly exhibited.

"I don't say you've done it consciously; but all the same, you've done it. Listen." (Quillian had been about to interpose.) "All your talk about unholy bargain, and all the rest of it, and all your professed friendly interest in Miss Hemmingay, is only so much damned cant with which you have, so far, blinded yourself. I let you go on because I wanted to see how far self-deception would carry you, and it's time for you to know yourself. You are making a preposterous fool of yourself for one reason, and one only. Do you remotely guess what it is?"

"No—I——"

"It's because you love Miss Hemmingay yourself."

Quillian stared in open-mouthed astonishment at the speaker.

"I saw it at my house—how you looked at her—spoke to her," continued Tayne. "You as good as cried it from the housetops!"

"You—you mean that I——"

"I mean that you love Miss Hemmingay yourself."

CHAPTER XXIV

VESPER CHOOSES

It was as though Quillian had been struck a heavy blow in the face.

He was about to deny hotly Tayne's assertion; before he could open his lips, however, he had a further and sharper knowledge of the fact that, if there were any truth in what the other had alleged, the structure of his outlook upon things would be shattered to its foundations.

Instead of being moved by selfless considerations, as he had fondly believed was the case, he would have deceived himself, and have acted from motives that, under the circumstances, were ignoble.

Tayne's voice interrupted his thoughts.

"Isn't that so?" he asked.

"If—if it were," faltered Quillian, "my conduct is despicable—mean—and instead of——"

"Go on!" cried Tayne as Quillian faltered. "Let's have it out."

"And instead of my thinking only of her, as I believed, I've been all the time considering—unconsciously—myself."

"What did I tell you the day I met you? That everyday love was the most arrant form of selfishness."

"But I don't care—think of her like that," cried Quillian hopefully. "It's faith I have in her: boundless, eternal faith. And as for being selfish, I'd die, and gladly, to save her pain."

"Why, man! That's the highest form of love. Admit I'm speaking the truth."

A further realization of how terribly his life would be affected in the event of his immense concern for Vesper being nothing other than love, seized Quillian in its grip,

and would not be denied: to escape, if only for the time, from a foretaste of the consequences, he cried:

"I'll disprove it. I'll write a cheque for the 'Home,' for any amount you please, and go right away, and never see her again. Only let me beg of you not to mention a word of this to her."

"Why not, pray?"

"She would never forgive me, never. I've been a blundering, impertinent fool—I see it all now—but—but——"

"I understand," said Tayne, and betraying a sympathy that was praiseworthy under the circumstances. "I understand more than you imagine. And whatever happens, I won't be outdone by you in generosity."

"What do you mean?" asked Quillian quickly.

"I was going to tell you. Miss Hemmingay shall have everything put before her, and she shall decide whether or no she shall break the engagement."

Visions of glorious possibilities of happiness he dared not dwell upon flashed across Quillian's brain: notwithstanding these, he cried:

"No."

"Not?"

"Anything rather than that. It would mean her knowing what I have done."

"Please yourself."

"Things had better go on as before, if you don't mind."

"Mind!" returned Tayne, and with a world of meaning in his voice. "That being so, I don't see any point in further prolonging this discussion."

Although Quillian dreaded to be alone with his griefs (he had resolved he should not see Vesper before she got away), he said:

"Not in the least. And please, please don't mention anything of this to Ves—Miss Hemmingay."

Before Tayne could tell him he had no such intention, the door opened, and Grumby admitted Mr. and Mrs. Brassington Nosworthy.

Nosworthy was an overfed, hopeless-looking man, who had long been cowed into dog-like submission to his formidable wife: they both wore evening dress.

"Good-evening," said Mrs. Nosworthy to Quillian. "How fortunate I am in finding you in! But Lord Tayne's message so worried me, I couldn't resist calling on my way to the Whitehall Rooms."

"Is—is that your husband?" was all Quillian could bring himself to say: the intrusion of Mrs. Nosworthy, and the commonplace things she stood for, into the emotionally charged atmosphere of the room, was as if someone had done him an underhand violence.

"Of course," she returned with a touch of contempt in her voice. "I don't know if you have met before, but you must know that my sentiments are always my husband's, isn't that so?"

"Yes, dear," quickly replied Nosworthy.

"So in speaking to me, you're addressing him. I need hardly say, Mr. Quillian, how the news of your decision annoyed me. It came at a most unfortunate time, didn't it?"

"Yes, dear," from her husband, as before.

"I have been thinking so much about the opening-day reception scheme, which I've possibly mentioned already. And I've been puzzling my brain as to whether my daughters should curtsy every two or three steps on presenting a bouquet to Royalty. Surely all my painstaking work has not been in vain!"

"I can tell you nothing definite now," replied Quillian. "So much has happened, that I shall have to think things over. I will let you know very shortly."

"Cannot you give an answer to-night?"

"It's impossible to-night."

"But if I've anything on my mind, I can't sleep, can I, dear?"

"Yes, dear!" came quickly from the husband, who had been addressed.

"What!"

"N-no, dear."

She left Quillian for Lord Tayne; and as she did so, Sister Jane unobtrusively entered the room, and came over to Quillian.

"Has she gone?" asked Quillian in a low voice.

"No."

"Not?"

"She won't."

"But——"

"She was looking at your books; and in taking one down, found a powder-puff, and a chocolate-box hidden——"

"What of it?" interrupted Quillian.

She questioned that man of yours, and whether or no he's been drawing the long bow (he may think you want to get married and he'll lose his job), she's—well, very difficult."

"How dare he! It's infamous—it's——"

"But what are we to do?"

"In any case, she must go. If she doesn't——"

"Try what you can do. Then you'll see for yourself the mood she's in."

Quillian, for all his resolve not to see Vesper again, might have faced her once more; if only to explain the existence of the powder-puff and chocolate-box, and to deny Grumby's exaggerations, had not Hemmingay and Sir Sylvester Meale (they had met on the doorstep) entered the room: the latter came over to Quillian and shook his hand.

It was evident that Hemmingay was worried; doubtless, reflected Quillian, because he had discovered his daughter's absence.

"Ah, Quillian! How do?" cried Hemmingay, whose eyes were roving here, there, and everywhere. "Not honouring us to-night?"

"No," from Quillian.

"Did you bring Vesper?" asked Tayne of Hemmingay.

"No. In fact——"

"Not?"

"L—left her at home dressing. You can guess what it is with a girl who isn't used to gaiety!"

"My car is outside. We can fetch her directly."

"Wouldn't hear of it. 'Pon my word, I wouldn't!" cried Hemmingay, with mingled anxiety and resolution.

"Why not?"

"Eh! Wouldn't think of putting you to all that trouble."

"What trouble is there in a few minutes on a car?"

"Wouldn't hear of it."

"But——"

"I'm so worried about Quillian 'turning us up' in this way."

Doubtless to conceal his concern regarding his daughter, Hemmingay made use of extravagant flattery in endeavouring to persuade Quillian to change his mind: his efforts were joined to those of Meale, who, patting Quillian on the back with his best nonconformist geniality, strongly urged how it would injure his (Meale's) reputation should a philanthropic work, which had been 'boomed' in his newspapers, come to naught.

Quillian was in divers moods, and almost at the same time.

He was on the point of flying from his flat, and leaving the others to settle matters as best they might; he was all but overborne by a desire to confront Vesper, and seek to discover the truth of Tayne's assertion; he knew a passion of remorse for having spoken of her as he had done: he was minded to make a last desperate effort to save Vesper from the marriage she contemplated.

His indeterminate thoughts were interrupted by the entrance of Sister Jane (she had quitted the room after she had spoken to Quillian), who again came over to him.

"I've talked to her, and she's more sensible," said Sister Jane.

"Well——"

"And since so many have come, I think it's safer for her to go."

"Is she going?"

"Don't you wish her to?"

"Yes—no. I don't know what I want."

"I shall do what I think best," declared Sister Jane.

As if moved by a like impulse, they both glanced at Lord Tayne, to see he was narrowly eyeing them.

"Does he suspect anything?" murmured Sister Jane.

"Not that I know of."

"He's ever so sharp, and—I'll get her to go now."

Before she could leave Quillian, Tayne was beside them, and asked in a low voice of his sister:

"Why do you keep on stealing from the room?"

"Why shouldn't I if I want to?"

"I know it's a free country; but is anything happening that you don't wish me to know?"

Quillian waited in a terrible suspense (it was really only the fraction of a second) for her reply.

"No," she said.

"Sure?"

"Quite."

Tayne next addressed Quillian, and asked him the same question.

His native truthfulness failed him; over and beyond his instinctive desire to shield a woman for whom he was deeply concerned, even if he did not indeed love her, was Sister Jane's example; although he full well knew he would suffer torments of conscience, he said, and stoutly:

"No."

"I know you would not tell a lie," remarked Tayne.

"Aren't you so certain of me?" asked his sister.

"You're a woman," he smiled. "And the best of you have the haziest notions of everyday morality."

Sister Jane slipped from the room as Sir Sylvester Meale came over to Quillian.

"Now, Mr. Quillian, surely I can persuade you to go back on your decision," he began.

Quillian was in a curious frame of mind just then: he had, for the time being, shut his eyes to the enormity of his transgression; and in some elusive fashion was in the mood to injure the man he had already wronged with a lie; doubtless this was why he was once more moved by a desire to prevent Tayne's marriage to Vesper.

"It all rests with Lord Tayne," he replied.

"Lord Tayne!" echoed Meale.

"I have already told him the one condition on which I will find all the money, and most of the energy to make the thing a success."

"Is this so?" asked Meale of Tayne.

"If I told you, which I'm not going to, the condition, you would know how preposterous it was."

"Indeed!"

"Why!—But I cannot—will not, repeat it."

"I wonder if I could guess," gently suggested Meale.

"What do you mean?" from Tayne.

"It's—it's naturally a very delicate matter," said Meale in his best bland manner, which somehow inclined Quillian's sympathies towards Tayne. "But—but—if I may say so without meaning the least offence—there is certainly some feeling in serious circles of the propriety of a man with—with—it's really most difficult to say——"

"With what?" asked Tayne.

"Well—er—to put it bluntly—of a man with your unfortunate past, which, I am sure you are the first to regret—marrying——"

"That is a matter I refuse to discuss," interrupted Tayne sharply.

"Very naturally from your point of view. My only purpose is to carry the scheme to a successful conclusion. I am not in the habit of being associated with failures."

"Of one thing I'm quite certain," declared Tayne. "There's nothing to be got from discussing it further to-night."

"Perhaps you are right," sighed Meale. "And these good people must be anxious to get on to their frivolity."

He shook hands with Quillian, who, immediately he was left alone, found himself staring at an ivory-white ostrich-feather fan, which lay on a table beside him: it was some moments before he gathered to whom it belonged.

He continued to gaze blankly at it; and as he did so, blood coloured his face.

Realizing the foolishness of what he was at, he looked up furtively, and perceived that the fan had caught Tayne's attention; he was beholding it with an impersonal curiosity.

The next thing Quillian was conscious of was that his eyes and Tayne's had met; that he was quailing beneath the other's scrutiny.

Quillian wished from the bottom of his heart that no one would notice the fan; even as he did so, Meale said to Mrs. Nosworthy:

"You've forgotten your fan."

"Fan!" returned Mrs. Nosworthy.

"Yes."

"Did you say——?"

"There on the table. It must be yours."

Mrs. Nosworthy loomed upon the table; looked hard at the incriminating fan, and said:

"It isn't mine. I wish it were."

"But——" began Meale.

"It must belong to some friend of Mr Quillian's."

"Eh!" from Meale in surprise.

Quillian was conscious that everyone was looking at him: too well aware that Tayne and Hemmingay must have recognized the fan, he did not know what to do with his eyes.

And he was acutely alive to the fact of his having told a lie.

Hemmingay sought to come to his rescue (for all his anxieties, Quillian had some sort of an idea that he would) and said:

"You had better all come: we're late as it is."

"But this fan!" from Mrs. Nosworthy, who had scented mischief.

"What of it?"

"Hadn't we better find out whom it belongs to?"

"It's no concern of ours."

"Not a bit," added Tayne.

"Ah!" sighed Hemmingay, who seemed greatly relieved. "Let's go. Vesper will be wondering what has become of me."

"But——" began Mrs. Nosworthy.

"It merely belongs to some friend of Quillian's," remarked Tayne offhandedly.

"I should not have thought he was a man to have such friends," remarked Meale, who had the prejudices of his sect against a Roman Catholic.

All might have been well had not Quillian lost his head: to Tayne's consternation, he said:

"I—I did not know it was there. Someone must have left it, and—and—I must try and find out to whom it belongs, and—and——"

"Mrs. Chatillon!" announced Grumby from the door.

Mrs. Chatillon entered the room; her characteristic self-possession was contrasted with the indifferently concealed curiosity of most of the others.

"Good-evening!" she smiled to Quillian. "Have I interrupted another—discussion?"

"Perhaps it belongs to Mrs. Chatillon," remarked Mrs. Nosworthy with heavy sarcasm.

Mrs. Chatillon glanced lazily at the speaker, who went on:

"It's that ostrich-feather fan: and Mr. Quillian cannot remember whose it is."

Mrs. Chatillon looked meaningly at Quillian, and as much as to ask if it would help him out of anything by claiming it. But Quillian was only alive to the fact that Vesper was standing stiffly in the door that Grumby had not closed: she appeared as though she were turned into stone.

"Is it yours?" sniffed Mrs. Nosworthy.

"It may be," remarked Mrs. Chatillon tentatively.

"It may have been one Mr. Quillian gave me."

"Indeed! Then it belongs to you?"

"No," said Vesper's voice.

All eyes were turned to the doorway where she still stood.

"It belongs to me," she went on.

Quillian glanced guiltily about him, and was acutely conscious of a silence that he believed would never come to an end.

And if he at all wondered why she had seen fit to reveal herself, some sort of explanation was supplied by the fact of her having witnessed Mrs. Chatillon's arrival, if she had not encountered her in the hall.

Tayne was the first to speak.

"Here you are," he remarked to Vesper, and as if the whole business were the most natural thing in the world.

"Good-evening," said Meale. "We did not know you were here."

"Indeed, no," spitefully added Mrs. Nosworthy. "Did we, dear?"

"Yes, dear," promptly replied her husband.

"We knew that Miss Hemmingay was in Mr. Quillian's flat!"

"N-no, dear."

"This requires no explanation," remarked Tayne with a self-possession and a generosity Quillian admired in spite of himself.

"Not in the least!" cried Hemmingay officiously; he was hard put to it to conceal his concern at what had occurred.

"I was quite aware Miss Hemmingay was somewhere about," continued Tayne. "I didn't want her to have any more of this scheme just for the present. She's rather 'fed up' with it."

"Quite so; we quite understand," gushed Mrs. Nosworthy. "Don't we, dear?"

"Yes, dear," chorused her husband, who was furtively admiring Vesper.

"But before we go, I do so hope Miss Hemmingay will persuade Mr. Quillian to change his mind. I don't know what people will say if all my efforts come to nothing."

"Never mind what people think," said Tayne.

"But——"

"They put a telescope to their eyes to look at the mistakes of others; and reverse it to examine their own."

The next thing Quillian was aware of was that the others, excepting Vesper, Tayne, and Hemmingay, had tactfully quitted the room (Mrs. Chatillon might have stayed had she not received an imploring glance from Quillian); and that Sister Jane was somewhere in the background.

He did his best to nerve himself for what was toward: so far as it was possible, he avoided looking at Vesper.

Lord Tayne was the first to speak.

"So you lied to me!" he began.

"I lied to you," admitted Quillian.

"Miss Hemmingay was here all the time?"

"Y-yes."

"Well——"

"You don't think——"

"I quite know the man I'm dealing with. Yet I should have expected something nearer the truth from Jane and yourself."

"I admit I lied," said Quillian shamefacedly.

"And had I been in your shoes, I should have done the same. Lies are the currency of social intercourse. But you did worse!"

"Worse!" cried Quillian in alarm.

"You lost your head. If you hadn't, all would have been well: but after——"

"Let me speak," interrupted Vesper, who all this time had been standing stock-still.

"There is nothing for you to say!" returned Tayne gently.

"There is much."

Quillian, so far as his dismay at the disastrous turn of events would permit, wondered what was coming: he listened with all his ears for anything Vesper might have to say, and wished Hemmingay would leave off fidgeting about the room.

"I want to tell you I could have easily got away: why I did not, I scarcely know even now," she began in a voice she seemed striving to control, and make the vehicle of a ruthless sense of duty.

"It's quite unnecessary to go into it now," remarked Tayne.

"Quite!" chorused Hemmingay.

"I wish to," she returned. "And more particularly since you have taken it as you have done."

"It's really quite unnecessary," repeated Tayne.

"It's my wish, and very necessary," she returned; after waiting a moment or two, she went on: "But whatever the reason why I did not, I'm glad I came in, now; ever so glad, because I wish to be honest with you."

"What a treasure!" cried Hemmingay; Tayne would have reproved him, had she not continued:

"What you have been told" (she indicated Quillian with a little gesture) "I do not know. But after I had dressed, I felt an impulse to come and see Mr. Quillian; and I foolishly surrendered to it."

"And Sister Jane was here all the time?" put in Hemmingay.

"If you don't shut up, father, I shall do something desperate," she cried angrily.

"Very sorry, my dear."

"Everything you say makes everything worse. Mr. Quillian is by way of being an old friend of mine, although I have not known him very long. But there was nothing in it; there could not be: he is engaged to be married, too."

It was as though Hemmingay were about to speak; a menacing look from Vesper made him hold his tongue.

"What we even talked about I as good as forget," she went on. "But whatever it was, or wasn't, or whatsoever you think of my coming as I did, I'm glad I came in."

"That's all right," said Tayne kindly. "You needn't say any more."

She disregarded his consideration for her, and continued:

"For if I'd got away, and you'd never have found out, the kinder you'd been to me, the more it would have been on my conscience."

"Quite done?" smilingly asked Tayne.

"I—I think so."

"Because I wish to have a say. While we're about it, I should like to get everything straightened out, so we can all know exactly where we are."

Vesper wearily seated herself.

"Our good friend Quillian was good enough to tell me that you were making a loveless marriage" (Vesper sat bolt upright); "that you didn't care two straws about me—or words to that effect—and that you had been more or less persuaded into an engagement with myself."

"He said that?" asked Vesper.

"Infamous!" fumed Hemmingay.

"Isn't that so, Quillian?" inquired Tayne.

"Is it—is it necessary to go into it now?" replied Quillian.

"Quite necessary. Because in order to show I'm not the villain of melodrama as Quillian might think, I give, in a sense gladly give. Miss Hemmingay her freedom should she desire it: in a sense, gladly, because quite the last thing in the world I wish is to see her unhappy."

Quillian could scarce believe he had heard aright; directly he realized the drift of Tayne's offer, he dared to believe that, after all, he had wrought his purpose in

saving Vesper; and, in spite of the fact that, even if he loved her, his engagement to Mercia should prevent him from marrying her, his heart leapt.

Vesper was silent; and with a silence that was almost unbearably eloquent to Quillian.

"You heard what I said?" asked Tayne.

"But she's not considering it," cried Hemmingay, whose agitation was such that he either nervously paced the room or stopped by a table and knocked over books or ornaments.

Vesper made a gesture of protest, and said in a low voice to which Quillian strained his attention:

"I heard what you said. May I ask when Mr. Quillian told you that?"

"This evening."

"This evening!" she echoed sharply.

"While you were here."

Vesper rose to her full height. "You spoke of me to-night?" she asked scornfully of Quillian.

Quillian hung his head.

"Answer. You spoke of me to-night?"

"I did."

"And before those wretched people?"

"He spoke when we were alone. The matter was only indirectly mentioned afterwards, and then only with Meale," replied Tayne.

"Sure? Not——"

"Quite."

"In what way?" asked Vesper; and as Tayne hesitated, she added: "I insist on knowing."

"Quillian had better tell you. Then no one can say I'm piling on the paint."

"Since you will know," Quillian forced himself to say, "when Meale was persuading me not to give up the 'Home,' I told him that Lord Tayne knew the condition on which I would go on. The condition was that he should not—not marry you—and—and Meale guessed it and—and——"

"You spoke of me before him?" asked Vesper with flashing eyes.

Quillian, who could not trust himself to speak, nodded his head.

"You spoke of me before——"

She did not finish; from the glance Quillian dared to take of her, he saw she looked as she did on that afternoon in Redcliffe Gardens, when she had so unexpectedly turned on him.

There was a further tense suspense; it was broken by her saying to Lord Tayne:

"Take me away."

Quillian slightly shuddered: he waited as one in a grievous nightmare for what was about to be.

Tayne gave Vesper his arm; followed by her father, who had, at once, recovered his native pomposity, they made to leave the flat.

Quillian involuntarily pressed the bell for Grumby to open the front-door.

"Good-night," said Tayne. "Men who can't keep their heads deserve to lose a woman."

"Good-night," returned Quillian.

He did not recognize his own voice; and prayed that Vesper would throw him one more word.

He was not quite certain, but he believed she murmured:

"Good-bye."

Away from the necessity of going with them to the threshold, Quillian was loth to lose sight of Vesper: he followed her to the front-door, and held it open while she descended (she would not wait for the lift).

And as he watched her go down in all the glory of her fearless honesty; her fine raiment; and on the arm of the man she was to wed; the scales fell once and for all from his eyes: he knew beyond any further possibility of disguise that to which he had steadfastly blinded himself for so long.

She went out of sight; and he thought his heart-strings would snap.

He presently returned to the room where Sister Jane was fingering her rosary.

She looked up and saw his pitiful face.

"What is the matter?" she asked.

"I love her. Oh! How I love her!" he moaned.

"I could have told you that."

"And all the time I've been selfish, and not known it!"

CHAPTER XXV

' BEASTS AT EPHESUS '

" Hi ! QUILLIAN. There you are !"

Quillian, who had been about to dip his head in a bucket of water, which he kept at hand for the purpose, looked in the direction of the voice, and descried Tommy Chalfont at the end of the walk.

Tommy, whose fat, red face was perspiring from his efforts to find Quillian in the gardens of ' Courts,' approached the latter, and the nearer he got, the wider he opened his eyes.

" What on earth are you doin', old sport ?" he asked.

" I'm trying to read," replied Quillian.

" Anyway, the book's big enough. Anything interestin' ?"

" Tertullian."

" Who's he ?"

" One of the early Fathers."

" Great Scott ! Bit dry, ain't it ?"

" It's a little difficult if one isn't quite in the mood."

" An' what's the water for ?"

" When I come to a passage I—I can't quite get the hang of, I put my head in it," said Quillian, who, if anything, was rather thankful Tommy had sought him out.

" That's one way of doin' it. Anyway, I'm glad I found you in, though it has been a job to find you: needle in a bundle of what's-its-name sort of thing. Mrs. Lownes, whom I met yesterday, said you were here, and as I was drivin' over to Philbrick's, I thought I'd look you up."

" Glad to see you. Will you sit down here ?"

" Must get over to Philbrick's: awfully important," said Tommy, who was fidgeting to be off.

" As important as that ?"

" Thought you might care to come too."

" But——"

" That is, if you ain't too taken up with Mercia."

" How do you mean?"

" S'pose now you're back, it will all be fixed up in no time."

" I have to go over there this afternoon," rejoined Quillian in a voice he strove to make casual.

" Then come on over to Philbrick's. Be a bit livelier than readin' old what's-his-name with your head in a bucket."

Quillian was undecided and looked it.

" I'd gladly stay and have a chat about old times, and all that sort of thing," almost sighed Tommy, " but what I'm on is ' no end ' important."

" Oh!" said Quillian, who was doing his hardest just then to stop his thoughts from a way they were all too prone to follow.

" It's always safe to confide in you, old sport, so I don't mind tellin' you. I'm after an under-gardener, who is leavin', before anyone snaps him up."

" A good gardener?"

" Blest if I know."

" Then——"

" I don't care a straw about his gardenin'; it's his voice I'm after. Sings alto, old dear. What d'ye think of that?" interrupted Tommy triumphantly.

" I don't know what to think," replied Quillian.

" Anyway, are you comin' over to Philbrick's? If you'll come along, I'll let you into a secret."

Quillian, who had been hard put to it to make headway with Tertullian on that morning, thought he may as well go with Tommy as do anything else; moreover he knew from bitter experience that the humblest distraction made lighter the load of griefs he was doomed to shoulder.

" I'll come," he said.

" Good. I've my brother's car. It's outside your ' show.' "

" What is this wonderful secret?" asked Quillian, after they had started.

"Half a mo'. Your road winds a bit and I haven't had too much experience of drivin'."

"Going to break our necks?"

"There're worse things," sighed Tommy, and Quillian, in his present mood, was almost of the same mind.

"Are you in trouble too?" inquired Quillian.

"Funny question for you to ask. You don't suppose I'd forgotten that dear little flapper, and the way she treated me, in five minutes?"

"I suppose not," assented Quillian, who thought on what a different plane from his friend's was his own love sorrow.

"Now we're clear of your park, it's all 'right-o,'" said Tommy, who changed to the second gear, before going on the highest. "Now we can talk."

"Well?" from Quillian.

"I needn't tell you how hard I've been hit by it all. You must have seen it in my face" (Quillian had done nothing of the kind), "an' if I'm not gettin' any thinner, I'm certainly no stouter, which shows what trouble's done for me."

"Of course," assented Quillian, who had much ado to fix his mind on what the other was saying.

"I've been pinin' an' pinin'—I can tell you, old man; and the only way I can see out of it all is to go in for art—head, neck, and shoulders."

"Indeed!"

"An' somethin' the pater, who's more crotchety than ever, can't shy at. What d'ye think I'm gettin' up for the winter?"

"I'm never any good at guessing."

"You'd never hit it if you did. Promise you won't give it away if I tell you."

Quillian gave the necessary assurance.

"A nigger troupe, old dear. What d'ye say to that?"

Quillian tried to express proper surprise.

"Trimby, the butler, is 'Mr. Johnson': I'm first corner man; and Tilkin, one of the grooms, is the other. Suppose you're no good at the 'bones'?"

"I'm afraid not."

"That was too much to expect. Pity! If you had

been, I'd have worked you in. I've got all the men who can sing at our place, an' it's wonderful what a lot of talent I found in the stable. Now I'm after Philbrick's under-gardener who I'm told sings alto. And in future I'll see the pater doesn't engage any man who hasn't a voice."

"Where are you going to perform?"

"Different places round. Schoolrooms and that sort of thing. One can go a long way on a brake. You see, I must do somethin' to occupy my mind. You're not looking over 'fresh'; s'pose you're worried too!"

"I am—rather."

"Thought the way that little flapper treated me would be a shock to you. An' it was awfully good of you seein' me through as you did: pacifyin' her husband, an' all that."

"That's all right," returned Quillian.

"All very well. That's why I wanted to do you a good turn by lettin' you show what you could do in my troupe."

A little later, Tommy said:

"I can't believe it even now."

"About——"

"Miss Fothergill; or Mrs. Bedwell, to give her her right name. The things that girl said to me—I can tell you, old sport. One night she told me she didn't know what love was till she met me."

"Oh!" absently from Quillian: his thoughts had taken wing at mention of the word love.

"That was the night she let out she was in trouble with her landlady, and I parted with five quid."

"She took it?" said Quillian as before.

"After a lot of fuss: but there's no denying she took it in the end. 'Nother time she wondered why I hadn't married. Told me I could have any girl in London if only I went the right way about it."

Quillian full well knew that there was one woman whom Tommy could never hope to win.

"That was the day she dropped a dressmaker's bill from her pocket: and, somehow or other, I insisted on settlin' it."

"'Nother time," confessed Tommy, "she said she never felt she wanted to kiss a man till she saw me."

Quillian bridled an inclination to ask Mrs. Bedwell's trouble on that occasion; his forbearance was wasted, for Tommy went on: "We were lookin' in a jeweller's window at the time; an' she was almost nasty because I bought her a wrist watch studded with pearls."

"I suppose she forgave you," remarked Quillian, who got a certain dismal pleasure in contrasting the 'dear little flapper' with a certain pearl above price.

"We were the best of friends in five minutes. And here we are."

Quillian was willing and loathe to visit old friends: on the face of it, he was thankful for anything to take him out of himself: in his heart of hearts he preferred to be solitary, even at the risk of suffering the pains he all too frequently endured on account of his love for Vesper Hemmingay.

Ever since the night his eyes had been opened, and he had seen keenly where before he had been blind, he had suffered the torments that he had believed were kept for the damned.

These were of divers kinds, and the result of separate causes.

First and foremost was the fact that she was, and would be, so long as there was breath in his body, the one possible woman in the world for him; since he could never hope to win her for his own, his life was irreparably blighted.

He took a sorry pleasure in recalling expressions of her mobile features; glances from her ever-changing eyes; cadences of her voice; and although these memories increased his griefs tenfold, he endured them gladly, cheerfully, inasmuch as they seemed the poorest of incense to burn before the shrine of the adored one.

The shrine, because since she had behaved honestly to Lord Tayne, in revealing herself of her own free-will, when she could so easily have got away, Quillian was certain she was that exceptional thing, a beautiful woman whose heart was free of the devils who found a hiding-place in the hearts of such as she.

Away from these, were increasing reproaches for the self-deception he had persistently indulged: he had loved

Vesper on first catching sight of her face, indeed almost before she had got down from the bus in the Fulham Road: and all the thousand and one little services he had taken the sharpest pleasure in rendering her, instead of being inspired by friendship, were one and all dictated by the most arrant selfishness since, according to a certain authority on the human heart, they were performed from a passionate desire to secure the favours of the loved one.

He had taken a subtle pleasure in cultivating the humility with which he had been endowed, and thought he had been practising this all along: now, he was too well aware that, in his dealings with Vesper, there had been only the covetous leanings of the flesh.

And then there had been his frantic eagerness (he knew now it was all pretence) to pluck but one brand from the burning in order to make himself worthy of Mercia Lownes! The shameful irony of it!

Worse than this, Vesper, who, with her woman's intuition, must have long ago seen how the land lay with his affections, would, in all likelihood, think of him as one of the most paltry of humbugs.

Then there were (these were very hard to bear) biting fits of jealousy with regard to Lord Tayne and the woman he would soon make his own; they mostly came to him in the night, when Quillian found sleep impossible, and was dolorously alive to the pitiless crawling of the hours.

Mingled with these were acute self-reproaches for the way he had muddled things from the start: he had no business to tie himself up to Mercia in the headstrong manner he had done: even after he had met Vesper, if he had not been such a pigheaded fool, and had seen who really held his heart, he could have faced Mercia, confessed the facts of the case and asked for his release: as things were, he was to see her on that afternoon, and tell her as well as he might that he could never marry her: and why not perform this unpleasant duty weeks back, and conceivably have married Vesper into the bargain?

And should Quillian think of the obstacles that existed to union with Vesper—her heretic faith, and her father's

connection with the Maltese 'College'—Quillian laughed aloud in bitter derision of such scruples.

This would bring him to wondering if Vesper loved him at all in return.

He was certain of her friendliness, and had ineffaceable recollections of their day in Richmond Park to comfort him should he doubt her liking for him: looks, manner, little tendernesses (she had given him a fraction of her tight skirt to sit upon so he should not catch cold from the damp tree-trunk) had all assured him of her esteem: more eloquent than any of these, was the something unspoken between them which they had fought hard to keep in the background.

But if she really loved him a little, as he was sometimes bold enough to believe, why was she so distant with him until she had learned he was engaged to be married; and why had she shown such a disturbing light-heartedness on top of this news?

This harassed him a lot: he vexed his soul about it for hours on end until some other aspect of the matter took its place to torture him.

It must not be imagined that Quillian's life was a constant round of suffering: there were merciful intervals during which his heart was bruised into insensibility; and all he was aware of was a dull sense of something amiss.

It was at these times, for which Quillian was not a little thankful, that he realized the futility of thinking what he would have done had he had the last momentous months over again: to assist this conviction, he recalled the lines from Omar Khayyâm which Vesper had repeated in the Park:

"That moving finger writes; and having writ,
Moves on: nor all thy Piety nor Wit
Shall lure it back to cancel half a line,
Nor all thy tears wash out a Word of it."

That moving finger had written to dire purpose for him: and all the torments he had known, and the many more to come in the days that stretched so bleakly before him, would not avail him one jot.

Fasting; prayer; above all, cold water as enjoined by

the Guardian of St. Bernardine in case of need, had proved disappointing.

Even the early Fathers (including Tertullian) failed him.

The barking of countless dogs greeted Tommy's vigorous ring at the door; directly this was opened, the hint of kennel which assailed Quillian's nostrils at once took his mind back to the occasion of his first coming to the Philbricks and, in so doing, reminded him of the fateful decision with regard to Mercia he had so foolishly taken.

Tommy, who was in a great hurry to snap up the undergardener who sang 'alto,' waited for Sir Percy in the hall, where Quillian could see by the behaviour of the dogs that something had gone wrong: they looked apprehensively about them; huddled gregariously; now and again, one would give another a furtive but sympathetic lick.

Sir Percy's greeting of Quillian was chastened by an obvious nervousness of manner: he had not been talking to the callers more than a minute or so before Quillian perceived that his manner had much in common with the dogs.

Sir Percy, also, glanced fearfully about him; had something of their look in his eyes; and would infrequently give them a hesitating but kindly pat: more than this, the dogs appeared to look upon him as being in identical case with themselves: they hung about his heels, and seemed to tell him, so far as they were able, that things were certainly bad, but that it did not matter so much since one and all were in the same boat.

An explanation was soon forthcoming.

"Sorry you've come at an unfortunate time, Quillian!" said Sir Percy, "'specially as I haven't seen you for ages. Missed you a lot, and wondered what had become of you. Fact is Beatrice is very 'difficult' to-day, and has been since yesterday. Things have gone wrong at the 'shows'; not even a V.H.C.; and she has an unhappy knack of letting us all know it. If it weren't that the dogs would miss me, I'd go for a long ride."

Quillian accompanied Tommy and Philbrick into the gardens where, after they had found the 'alto,' Tommy talked to him at length: Quillian was left to Sir Percy, and, whilst thus employed, he was seized by overmastering

thoughts of Vesper; excusing himself to Philbrick, and telling Tommy he was in the mood to walk, and that the other would soon overtake him on his car, he was deaf to their several protests, and set off in the direction of 'Courts.'

He was all too accustomed to these frenzies of longing; and heavy-handed experience had taught him it was no use attempting to withstand them; he could only bear with them as well as he might, and trust to time, the great but leaden-footed healer, to mend the wounds in his heart.

This morning, tree, hedgerow, and the beasts of the field were lazing in the September sunshine; their peace furnished an almost irritating contrast to his unquiet imaginings.

He passionately wondered what Vesper was doing while he was treading that remote (in the sense of being far away from her) road with quick, nervous steps: for all he knew to the contrary (he had written to Sister Jane to ask her not to tell him anything of her doings) she had already married and was enjoying a prolonged continental honeymoon: the reflection that, but for his unforgivable blundering, he might have been in Tayne's shoes gave him a pain in the head: the only consolation he could get was the sorry hope that, even if Vesper did not wish to think of him, he might sometimes enter her thoughts unbidden.

He passed a row of cottages without which a man had just pulled up with a piano-organ; after Quillian went by he turned the handle and played the 'Dream Waltz': Quillian had already discovered to his cost how music of almost any kind quickened his longings for Vesper; to-day was no exception.

There was a slight wind in the direction in which he was going; as he was pursued by the lilt of the hackneyed melody, insistent memories of the loved one sung in his heart.

He was more than ever conscious how slender a thing was the ascetic barrier with which he had thought to protect himself from the assaults of human frailty: he had believed himself strong, and had taken a grim pleasure in

his strength: and now he was abased in the dust; was clad in metaphorical sackcloth; and had thrown ashes on his head, all before a woman whom his many years of monastic discipline had taught him was a mere instrument of the Evil One to lead man from the Narrow Way.

He was spiritually humbled; and in full despite of the promptings that sought to tell him that such an one as he was playing a mean part in being so easily cast down from his former aloof estate, he cried to himself, and with a passionate conviction, that he was not worthy of her.

He was possessed by a hunger of longing to do something to prove the love that welled within him: realizing his impotence, he groaned in travail of spirit: he could do nothing; and she would never know he held life, and all it offered, as dust in the balance where her happiness, if not her lightest wish, was concerned.

With what a gay courage would he sacrifice himself on the altar of his devotion; even as he dwelled upon the glory of such a self-denial, his fancy winged its flight.

It was as though he and she were living in the days of the persecutions of the Christians in Imperial Rome, persecutions dear to the heart of Christian apologists, who conveniently forget that those who suffered martyrdom had offended the tolerant Roman law by spreading the miasma of anti-patriotism.

She was a Christian maiden about to be thrown to the lions; he, a spectator in the amphitheatre, who had great possessions and loved her: such was the power of this love that every consideration which should have held him back was thrown to the winds: leaving his seat, he forced a way into the arena, where they found heaven in meeting death together.

If such an opportunity would only present itself, he reflected—until he perceived the infamy of condemning Vesper to a cruel end in order that he might prove his devotion.

The fluttering of a skirt at the turn of a road caught his eye: if only it might be Vesper, who had sought him out because she loved him after all, and could not be happy without him: such things were commonplaces of the novels he had dipped into on first coming to London, so,

with a sickly hoping against hope, he hastened his steps in order to overtake whomsoever she might be.

Prosaic fact was not on all fours with fiction on that September morning: beyond being tall, the woman Quillian came upon had nothing in common with the desire of his heart: she was plain and elderly; and looked the district visitor of the stage.

After he had laughed bitterly at expecting anything else, his imagination roamed again: he pictured possible environments from pages of the world's history, in all of which he did something heroic in order to save, or please, the adored one.

He was an inquisitor of the Romish Inquisition, an institution his reading had told him was not the benevolent organization he had formerly been assured was the case; Vesper, a trembling heretic: she was convicted; condemned; and he planned her escape at the cost of his life.

Then he was the leader of a mob of mercenaries; she among the spoil of a town his men had taken by assault: they had drawn lots for her and——

Before he could get any further, he was caught up by Tommy's car and was compelled to listen to Tommy, who was in high feather at having secured the coveted under-gardener.

At something after four that afternoon, Quillian sat at tea with Mrs. Lownes, who was, if anything, looking younger and happier than when he had last seen her.

He had dreaded the interview as calculated to put him in a sorry light; now he was with her, however, their common sympathy, which had asserted itself as soon as they had set eyes on each other, did something to lessen his apprehensions.

"It's easy to see what is the matter with you," she remarked, as soon as they had become at all confidential.

"Have I so changed?"

"A lot."

"The reason is why I wrote asking you to see me."

"You have been 'fighting beasts at Ephesus,'" she went on, and disregarding his remark.

Quillian smiled grimly.

"I've been in the same arena and can sympathize," she said.

"And yet you're looking better than ever."

"I've reason to be."

"I'm so very glad to hear that!" he said almost inquiringly.

"Thank you. It's Joan."

"Joan!"

"I think she understands more than I gave her credit for. We've become friends, and I get a lot out of that," she sighed.

"I'm so glad."

"There's more in Joan than I thought. But I hate talking of myself—to you. What you've been doing is much more interesting."

Hesitatingly, and with the assistance of tactful prompting from Mrs. Lownes, the latter was soon acquainted with the whole story, together with the fact that, since his heart was held by another, he would not, could not, insult Mercia by asking her to be his wife.

He had been a little curious to know what point of view this elusive woman would take of his not very creditable exploit in the fields of romance; she listened with unruffled calmness to the more coherent portion of his story; after he had done, she said:

"What fools men are!"

"What do you mean?"

"With all their ridiculous doubtings and hesitations. Do you know what I should have done had I been in your shoes?"

"Something unusual."

"Once I'd made up my mind I wanted her, I should have got out a special licence; got her into a cab—by force, if necessary—and have married her offhand whether she liked it or no."

"But——"

"But she would have liked it, Mr. Simple. There's only one wooing we women really understand; and that is of the barbarian who bangs the woman he wants on the head with a club and carries her off. The nearer men get to that, the more we like it."

"I won't fail to tell all this to Mercia," said Mrs. Lownes presently, and with a certain feminine, if unmotherly, satisfaction.

"No," returned Quillian decisively.

"Don't you want her to know?"

"I must tell her myself."

"But——"

"It is my punishment.—One of them."

"Please yourself."

Thus it came about that some half an hour later Quillian stood with Mercia on the terrace; she had come in from the performing of some of her uncounted good works whilst he had been with her mother: he perceived that she was more elaborately turned out than formerly; otherwise (doubtless he contrasted her in his mind's eye with the peerless Vesper) he was surprised she had ever attracted him. He was not a little ashamed of noticing, in spite of himself, that she looked older; 'sharper'; less wholesome-looking than when he had first met her; this increased a distaste for her which was undoubtedly set up by her being the innocent cause of the mess he had made of his love-affairs.

Her evident pleasure at seeing him again, although it made his task the more distasteful, did not lessen his resentment.

They talked commonplace, and Quillian wondered how best to tell her what he had to say, until Mercia looked quickly about her, glanced at the costly ring upon her engagement finger, and then put her hand upon his arm.

He started guiltily; she withdrew it, saying as she did so:

"I am sorry."

This was the most human thing in her he had yet met with; it made it all the more difficult to summon his courage to begin.

"It is I who am sorry," he forced himself to say.

She was quick to note the hardness in his voice; she looked at him with apprehensive eyes.

"Because—because I am not good enough for you," he went on, somewhat hypocritically.

"What do you mean?"

"It was in my heart to write to you, and tell you; but because I am at fault, I must give myself the pain of telling you what I believed would be cowardly to write."

She did not speak, but nodded as much as to say that he was to go on.

He told her forthwith as much of the matter as belonged to his present purpose of giving her her freedom from one so unworthy of her—at least, that is how he put it: it was a halting, troublesome story; he was thankful after he had done, and with a sinking of spirit, waited for what she might do or say.

If she had shown dismay; violent grief; or, most of all, had chided him for his infidelity, he would have thought far more of her than he did, for, after a silence he thought would never come to an end, her eyes assumed a look of holy resignation; then, she turned from him, and gazed across the gardens and park with the set, meaningless smile he had learned to know so well.

This, more than anything else, told him that here was no creature of exquisitely human clay, but an abstraction of Sunday-school virtues, whose colourless, humourless perfection would almost drive him to evil ways if he were foolish enough to join his life to hers.

His sufferings had made him brutally selfish in some respects; perhaps, because of his realization of her ineptitude, together with the native proneness he shared with the rest of his species to dislike those he had injured, he was almost near to hating her on the spot.

CHAPTER XXVI

WATER OF SILOAM

THE trees and women of Paris were clad in their gayest spring raiment as Quillian drove from the Gare de Lyons to the Hotel de Crillon; but he cared for none of these things: his heart was heavy with a lasting discontent.

For eight months or more he had tried to find distraction in travel; he had wandered across France and Italy; and had visited bits of Spain: and if the best that could be said of him was that he was getting accustomed to the griefs that ever gnawed at his heart, there was no denying he was weighed down by a loneliness that was often well-nigh unbearable.

During this time, he had heard nothing of Vesper; in order that he should not come upon her changed name, he had avoided looking at English newspapers; and he had asked those, including Mrs. Lownes, whom he corresponded with, not to mention her in their letters.

Now that another spring was caressing the world, it was as though a highly charged magnet were drawing him to England; the nearer he got, the more powerful seemed its attraction: he would not have broken his journey in Paris had he not received a letter from Mrs. Chatillon (it was one of many) saying she was staying in this city, and would much like to see him if he could spare the time.

Quillian recalled how she had poured oil on his wounds during the committee days of the now defunct 'White Slave' scheme; he had believed it possible that seeing her again might take him out of himself; and ease, if only temporarily, his appalling weariness of spirit.

Arrived at his hotel, he tubbed and rested after his journey from Avignon; at something after four he sought her out at her apartment in the Avenue de Bois de Boulogne.

The tasteful simplicity of her Parisian home was grateful to one who had become inured to the formality of hotel accommodation; the more than friendly greeting she welcomed him with was likewise pleasing to one who had been solitary, and in more ways than one, so long.

She was always a well-dressed woman; to-day, she wore a white chiffon frock trimmed with sable: it was so contrived that it seemed to give a necessary inch to her stature.

"And how have you been all this long time?" he asked, after she had given him some tea.

"Never mind me: tell me of yourself."

"There is nothing to tell," he replied.

"Nothing?"

"That is of any importance."

"It depends on whom you're speaking to," she replied.

"I suppose it does," he assented.

"Well?"

"I've simply been moving about."

"Any adventures—of the soul I mean?"

"None."

"Sure?"

"Quite."

He was sensible of, and by no means objected to, the sympathetic gaze of her fine dark eyes which, to-day, were opened wide.

"And what are you going to do next?" she went on.

"I don't know."

"No plans?"

"No."

"No—ambitions?"

"None—at present."

"Nothing at all?"

"Nothing at all."

"Then you didn't think me a nuisance for dragging you out of your way?"

"I was very glad."

"Oh! Then you're in no hurry to rush away?"

"I—I don't think so."

"And it wouldn't bore you to stay a day or two in Paris, and see something of me?"

Quillian, who had been taken out of himself by meeting his old friend, assured her that he would be very pleased.

"And have you been quite well—physically—since you've been away?"

"Isn't it time I asked you a few questions?"

"You can if you want to," she laughed. "Tell me how you think I'm looking."

"As you always do."

"No older?"

"Not a day."

"But I'm sitting with my back to the light—and that's always suspicious. Look now."

Quillian was not blind to the symmetry of her dark comeliness; her fine eyes; above all, to the infinite capacity for emotion they displayed.

"Well?" she said, as he did not speak.

"You might be just one day older," he laughed.

"It's not a subject to jest about," she sighed. "Still, I'll forgive you, as it's seemed to cheer you up."

"I'm glad to see you looking so well," he returned.

"Not at seeing me?"

"At least, it shows you've been enjoying yourself. What have you been doing?"

"Boring myself to death."

"Here or in England?"

"Somerset, mostly."

"You have a home there, too?"

"I have several homes, and yet not one, if you can understand."

"I quite understand."

"I suspected you would. It takes so many essential things to make one."

Quillian nodded assent.

"Of course, it's foolish, as one never knows other people's troubles, but I often envy the humblest cottage where there's husband, wife, and children."

There was a fall in the temperature of Quillian's comparative lightness of heart, and he asked:

"What have you been doing in Somerset?"

"I've rather nice gardens there."

"Well?"

"I was fairly interested for a time, but what are gardens if one has no one one cares about to wander in them with?"

"I suppose that applies to most things?"

"More to a woman than a man: a man can do so much."

"And what are you going to do next?"

"I wish I knew. Anyway, you're not in a hurry to rush off for a day or two!"

"No," he said decidedly.

"To-morrow must take care of itself. Do you know Paris?"

"Tourist Paris."

"You must let me take you about."

"You will?"

"Not to people I know. But where I please, and how I please. You don't mind?"

"I don't think so," he smiled.

"We won't start till to-morrow: you must be tired to-day."

"Not a bit."

"Don't throw your youth in my face. I thought you might be tired, and arranged for you to dine here. You won't disappoint me?"

The anxiety with which this was urged surprised and not a little flattered Quillian.

"I shall be very pleased," he told her.

"And so shall I," she returned.

Thus it came about that Quillian gave up all thought of returning to England, and passed many days with Mrs. Chatillon: they would meet at any and all times and at different places, and spend long hours in curiously diverse ways.

For all her wealth and social standing, she had an astonishing knowledge of the many sides of Parisian life (she told him she was an 'Anglais de Chaillot,' and had to explain what it meant); under her guidance, he came upon much that had hitherto been hid.

Sometimes, they would live the everyday life of those of their condition; but since the ways of the wealthy are

much the same in towns the world over, both he and she got more entertainment from exploring the by-ways of the exquisite city where Mrs. Chatillon had pitched her tent.

On these occasions, they would go about as ordinary sightseers, and lunch and dine and sup wherever they might chance to be; and not infrequently in 'les petits trous,' beloved of the Parisian gourmet.

The change from days that were a burden and a weariness of the flesh to hours crowded with adventure, from heavy-hearted isolation to the stimulating companionship of Mrs. Chatillon, almost bewildered Quillian's understanding: he was conscious of, and ever so thankful for, relief from his load of care, for while he was with her, his griefs at losing Vesper were dulled, and sometimes blotted out: it was as though an opiate had been given to one in the grip of a painful malady.

Otherwise, the things that lingered in his memory were chance impressions his mind snapshotted at odd times.

There was a girl crossing the boulevard who was a splash of black and red: a long red feather stuck out from her black hat: she had red lips, and the black dress she lifted revealed a red underskirt.

Once they came upon an open place belonging to a dancing-hall frequented by *midinettes*: it was all trees and tables, and quite deserted: the many-hued paper lanterns seemed to have been lit for the ghosts of departed revellers who haunted the spot.

Then there was the degenerate mouth—the hall-mark of his family—of Philip IV., as painted by Velasquez and hung in the Louvre.

And a little family party which was celebrating some event in a part of Paris where Quillian and his friend had lost their way: the husband was elderly, puny, consumptive; his wife, black-eyed, buxom; they had a little boy with the face of a depraved old man: the champagne they swallowed made the husband cough; his wife's eyes shine ominously; the son appear more wicked, if that were possible.

One afternoon Mrs. Chatillon and Quillian were seated at a table in the Café de la Paix: she called his attention to an old man and a young girl near by; and all he could

see just then was a shining brown eye against a moth-eaten grey beard.

There was a Sévres blue sky which slowly surrendered to the darkness while they were dining at the Petit Paillard in the Champs Élysées: lastly, on leaving the Café Riche, where they had supped after going to the Théâtre des Capucines, they had come into the crowded boulevard, and among the gaily dressed throng was a legless man who was propelling himself on a home-made trolley.

And mingled with these more vivid memories, and many others of a lesser insistence, were recollections of Mrs. Chatillon's amused understanding of the world and its ways; and of her unfailing friendship, which was largely made up of a tender sympathy: sometimes it seemed as if she were a stimulating friend; at others, it was as though she were mothering him.

He did not see, or would shut his eyes to the fact, that the attraction they had for each other became more potent every day.

She occasionally dropped hints of the something that had crippled her happiness; by putting two and two together, he gathered she had started life with romantic notions, and the highest hopes of a happy future, until she had been persuaded to marry a hard-living man, and more with the fatuous idea of assisting him to mend his ways than consulting her deepest inclinations.

All too soon she had discovered her grievous mistake: she had suffered years of harsh treatment alternating with neglect: it was only comparatively recently that she had ordered her own destinies.

It was after one of these moments of self-revelation that Quillian had said:

"Why don't you take your courage in both hands and divorce him?"

"Why should I?" she returned.

"You would be free."

"What then?"

"You could marry again, and perhaps" (Quillian was not so cocksure on these matters as he had been) "find happiness after all."

Mrs. Chatillon became reflective; her face had clouded; and Quillian had asked:

"Have I said anything amiss?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry."

"In putting foolish ideas in my head."

"Indeed!"

A further silence was broken by her saying:

"Life is only a series of servitudes; in escaping one, I should find another."

"How do you mean?"

"Well" (Mrs. Chatillon spoke with an unusual hesitation)—"it's just conceivable I—I might get very fond of, and perhaps marry, a man much younger than myself."

"Well?"

"It's a way with women of my age."

"Where's the harm if you love each other?"

"Every, and the worst, harm. Think! In so many years—I am not going to say how many—I shall be fifty, and an old woman. How old are you?"

"Twenty-six."

"If—if he were a man of your age, you would then be in your prime and attracted (it is the way of men of forty) by mere girls. Imagine what I should suffer at realizing how he loathed me (for he would) at the tie I should be. And as the years passed, I should be more of a dead weight to him; and more of a curse to myself, with the mad jealousy of an old woman for a young husband."

"You're assuming——"

"I *know*," she impatiently interrupted. "It's sober fact which nothing can alter."

"Then what are you going to do?"

Mrs. Chatillon laughed lightly.

"What does that mean?"

"To-morrow must take care of itself."

There were times (and as the days went by these became less infrequent) when Mrs. Chatillon got tired of going out and about; she preferred to stay at her tasteful home in the Avenue de Bois de Boulogne, where she lost much of her former light-heartedness: she became moody

and prone to long silences which were often punctuated with sighs.

Quillian began to wonder if he were getting on the nerves of this woman, whom nothing seemed to satisfy for long: he did his best to take her out of herself, and with poor success.

He feared she would leave him in the lurch, and at the mercy of the old malady; his anxiety on this score (he did not fail to realize his selfishness) became such that he made up his mind to question her.

"I want to ask you something," he began; and as he spoke, he perceived that she had not been lost in thought, as he had believed, but was keenly watching him from out of her widely opened eyes.

"Well?"

"It's a little difficult."

"Surely it's not hard for you to ask me anything!"

"Still——"

"Knowing, as you must, I could refuse you nothing."

Quillian was curiously moved by an indefinable quality in her voice.

"What is it?" she went on.

"You've changed of late!"

"You have noticed it?"

"And I wanted to know if—I'm boring you?"

"Is that all?" she remarked almost contemptuously.

"It isn't a small thing to me."

"I mean, is that all you were going to ask of me?"

"Y-yes."

"Here is your answer. You do not bore me: anything but. Perhaps it would be better for me if you did."

Quillian pressed her regarding this last, but she would tell him no more.

There came a time when Mrs. Chatillon would not see Quillian at all. She was not well enough she said in the little note she sent him by her maid. He must be tired of taking out a middle-aged woman; and till she was better, he had best amuse himself with some charming Parisian girl, of whom there were plenty to choose from.

He begged that he might be with her, but she was obdurate; he sent her flowers; fruit; books; sweetmeats

in profusion, together with anything he thought might cheer her.

And then he had much ado to look after himself.

Left to his own devices in a city of which the novelty had long worn off, Quillian was seized with a return of his old discontents; these were the harder to bear since the companionship he had been deprived of insisted on his loneliness.

He was again a prey to the old heart-hunger for Vesper; mingled with this was a craving for Mrs. Chatillon, which he could not make out at all.

He well understood his longing for Vesper, but could not comprehend why he should be attracted by another woman; at least, not until he analyzed his emotions, and perceived that, apart from the fascination Mrs. Chatillon held for him, the latter provided a means of patching up, if not of ultimately healing, the wounds in his heart.

Yes, this is what it came to; that he was maimed; and that she was to him another Pool of Siloam: she, alone, could ease his many hurts, and some day make him whole.

Following upon this realization, he sought more persistently to see her; her refusal put an edge on his desires respecting her.

He became so tormented by his griefs regarding Vesper; his passionate anxiety to obtain the only possible alleviation; his craving for the happiness Mrs. Chatillon's companionship supplied, that he called at her flat, and after asking for her maid, he sent a message saying he must see her.

Rather to his surprise, his request was granted; he was in considerable trepidation as to how he might be received.

He was told to go to a certain room; on opening the door, he found Mrs. Chatillon resting upon a settee.

She smiled at him with all the old frankness, and he at once knew that his temerity was more than overlooked: then he was dismayed at seeing her completely break down, and give way to tears.

Quillian stood stock-still; away from knowing what to do, he was much taken aback at the sight of this proud

woman so helplessly surrendering to whatsoever her sorrow might be: his heart was wrung with sympathy.

The next thing he was aware of was that she had risen to her feet, and with a defiant look in her eyes.

"You don't care a bit!" she remarked.

"I care very much," he returned.

"You do?" she asked, and smiled through her tears.

"I do. I thought you had done with me."

"Then——"

She did not say any more; she sank on a chair, and again gave way to tears.

He sat beside her, and asked:

"What is it?"

She did not reply, and he repeated his question.

Still getting no response, he touched her arm.

She seized his wrist, and keeping her head away from him, she said:

"Don't leave me!"

"I've no intention of doing so."

"Don't be angry with me."

"Why should I be? Can't I do anything for you?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing at all?"

"Nothing at all. That is why I'm so miserable."

Then, her extremity was such that, careless of appearances, she turned to him, and wept unrestrainedly on his shoulder.

He did his best to comfort her, and as he did so, he was more and more drawn to this woman who thus proved her complete confidence in him.

"Are you sure I can do nothing for you?" he asked presently.

She shook her head.

"Won't you tell me what it is?"

"I'll tell you that much."

"What is it?"

"I'm so lonely: so very, very lonely."

"But——"

"So lonely! How much, you will never know."

He placed the hand that was free upon the hand that held his wrist.

"If—if I were not so alone in the world—if—if I had a child, I should be happy," she faltered. "But my heart's been empty so long: and unless it's full, everything turns to ashes."

She again wept, and once more he sought to console her; and as he did so, he was even more powerfully attracted to this woman who understood him so well; whose trust in him was such that she suffered her tears to fall on his hands.

He, too, had endured much, he reflected. And since her friendship solaced him, and since he was evidently something to her, why should they not do their utmost to succour each other?

Then he was conscious that she had all but nestled in his arms; she was laying quite still, and her cheek was pressed to his.

Wholly out of consideration for her, he sought to free himself; upon his making the attempt, her hold tightened upon his arm.

He surrendered to her mood, and together they sat in an eloquent silence.

Much that he had paid little or no attention to was revealed to his ken: the voice of conscience was stilled or he did not hearken to its promptings: he was only aware of an overmastering desire to fly in the face of the precepts of his earlier days, and seize with both hands the happiness (together with the forgetfulness) he now knew was his for the asking.

And every moment he was getting more possessed of a subtle intuition that this much-tried woman was moved by a like desire where he was concerned.

He was intoxicated by the scent of her hair; it was as much as he could do to prevent himself from telling her how he was in the grip of a loneliness comparable to hers: a loneliness she alone could remove.

Suddenly, she broke from him, and rose to her full height.

"You must go," she said.

"Go!" he faltered.

"Anyhow, for to-day."

"But——"

"I wish it. Not for my sake, as you might think, but for yours."

"I don't wish to go," he said.

"I don't wish it, either. And you must know it, if you're not a fool. But you're not that, or I wouldn't have put up with you for five minutes. And you're a good man, and I don't want you to decide anything you might afterwards curse me for."

"But——"

"Go. You shall hear from me to-morrow."

He could have stayed if he had insisted; but he tore himself away: the last he saw of her was her widely opened eyes which were gazing at him almost reproachfully.

"I must either have you for always, which means until you tire of me, or not at all," she wrote the next day.

"Decide one way, and if you do not wish to come, go right away, and do not let me hear anything of you or where you are: in this case, I shall understand; and will try and think you are going because you think well of me. You will never know how much you are to me. You are the only man I've ever really cared for."

Quillian was sorely troubled: he was thrown this way and that: together with the fascination Mrs. Chatillon had for him, here was a ready means of forgetting his manifold griefs, and snatching some sort of happiness from the tangle he had made of the threads of his life.

It was a sharp fight; in the end Quillian conquered: the stubborn struggle told him the unsuspected potency of the charm Mrs. Chatillon exercised.

He would not have come through as he did had he not persistently kept before his eye the shining example of Vesper who, on the night of her momentous visit to his flat, had behaved so honestly with Lord Tayne.

And so that he might not be weak after his first frenzy of high-minded resolve was exhausted, Quillian took the next boat-train for England.

CHAPTER XXVII

FOOTSTEPS

QUILLIAN walked the platform of the railway junction at Roulers; he had taken the midday boat from Dover, and now waited for the train that would carry him to Ypres.

He had spent the best part of a harassed fortnight in London, where he had been haunted by the thousand and one associations of Vesper which crowded into his mind at every turn: the wounds he had thought in a fair way to be healed had opened and bled afresh: to one accustomed to suffering as he, he was rudely surprised by their capacity for pain.

He had been sorely tempted to seek the alleviation that was his for the asking; and had been conscious of a weakening of his resolution: he was thankful he had put a distance between himself and Mrs. Chatillon, to whom he had sought to explain by letter the course he was striving to adhere to.

So he might not stumble by the way, it had occurred to him that the best thing he could do was to pay a visit to the monastery of St. Bernardine at Ypres; take counsel with the wise Guardian; and discover what sort of appeal the old life made to one who had drunk deep of the wine of things secular.

The idea had taken root in his mind, and now he was acting upon it.

The only person he had informed of his resolve was Mrs. Lownes, and in reply to a letter from her he had received as he was leaving Paris.

Rather a strange thing had happened in connection with Mrs. Lownes: she had written to ask him to defer his departure for two or three days, and to let her know the date he was crossing the Channel: he had done as she

had wished, and with scarce a thought for the motives that inspired this request.

Quillian paced the station platform with a heavy heart; he glanced idly at the two or three others who were waiting; the smartly dressed knowing-looking young woman with her shabby old mother; the two Flemish-speaking country-folk; the pompous station-master who was strutting in all the glory of gold lace and a government job.

He found himself envying the latter's conception of his self-importance; even as he did so, he was pulled up short: he believed he had caught a glimpse of Vesper in the door of one of the waiting-rooms.

His heart was a-beat; and he knew a further dejection of spirit, if that were possible: he had had similar illusions far too often before to believe that this had anything that was not in common with the others.

His train was signalled, and streamed into the station: he immediately got into his smoking-compartment, and stared with unseeing eyes at a devotional work he had found in his pocket.

He fell to looking idly out of the window, and presently caught sight of the spires and walls of Ypres across the fields: they seemed to have been dumped there to get them out of the way.

Until he reached the platform, he contrasted the fine hopes with which he had set out with their sorry fulfilment.

Doubtless he was no better off than most of his kind, who had griefs of one kind and another to shoulder: perhaps he had been at fault in making too sure of victory.

And, according to certain authorities, even if happiness were obtained, it sooner or later turned to ashes in the mouth: possibly there was something in the epigram of a French wit to the effect that 'we are never so happy or so unhappy as we believe we are.'

The train stopped, and Quillian got out; carrying his bag, he gave up his ticket, and crossed the ill-kept grass without the station in the direction of the Rue de Lille.

The smell of the decayed town assailed his nostrils, and awakened vivid memories of his days at St. Ber-

nardine: in the twinkling of an eye, he was aware that, after having eaten of the fruits of life, no matter how bitter they had been to the taste, he could not find it in his heart to live for the rest of his days on the musty crusts of ecclesiastical fare.

And as if to assist this conviction, he again had an impression of the proximity of Vesper, and more sharply than before: this further assured him that the idleness inseparable from monastic life, in giving him overmuch time to think of her, would retard the efforts of the great healer.

But, in any case, he would see the Guardian, who would give him his ear, and, doubtless, furnish advice out of the store of his worldly knowledge.

Quillian's hand trembled as he rang the bell of St. Bernardine; while he waited for it to be answered, a further curious experience befell him: he heard hesitating footsteps approaching on the pavement; footsteps which awoke disturbing echoes in his heart: even if he had turned his head, he could not see whom they pertained to, for the door was in a sharp bend of the road.

There were, also, footsteps within, which seemed to represent the claims of the spirit, and with the others, that stood for the world, appeared to be contending for his possession.

The associations of the friary may have been responsible for the concern for his soul which took hold of him just then, for, as if to escape possible temptations of the flesh, he again pulled the bell handle, this time violently; the door was immediately opened by a friar and a lay-brother, whom Quillian did not know.

The footsteps in the road had quickened, and were almost upon him; notwithstanding the insistent appeal they made to his understanding, Quillian entered the monastery, and without glancing back.

The next moment, the door had closed ominously behind him; and it was as though it definitely cut him off from the ways of men and women.

He was shown into a waiting-room, where he had ample leisure to reflect on what had befallen him: he more than regretted his precipitancy; and wished, if only to satisfy

his curiosity, he had looked to see whom the one without the monastery had been.

He was kept waiting such a long time that he believed he had been forgotten: he was thinking of calling attention to the fact of his presence when the lay-brother, who had assisted at the opening of the door, came to tell him that the Guardian would now receive him.

Quillian was forthwith conducted to his former spiritual Father, who looked even grosser than of yore, and who more than ever resembled a rudely carved idol: partly from knowledge of how he had erred and strayed, partly from force of habit, Quillian knelt at his feet.

"Greeting, my Father!" he faltered.

The priest did not reply; Quillian feared the Guardian might have hardened his heart against him on account of things that may have reached his ears, until he (Quillian) perceived that the other was not a little affected by their meeting.

The Guardian took a pinch of snuff; blew his nose hard; took more snuff, and again trumpeted loudly, before laying his hand upon Quillian's head, and telling him to rise.

Quillian did as he was bid.

"Now I can have a good look at thee, my son," said the Guardian. "And do not turn away your eyes, for I have already read all I wanted to know, and more."

"Is it so plain?"

"For those who have eyes to see. Did I not warn thee, my son, before you set out?"

"You did, my Father."

"Was I not speaking words of truth?"

"All you said was truth and more."

"The way is hard and beset with cunning pitfalls for the unwary?"

"To say nothing of the backslidings of one's heart."

"The heritage of all children of Adam. Were it not for the Church, which is ever a good Samaritan to those who fall by the way, mankind would be in sorry case."

"Even so, my Father."

A short silence was broken by the Guardian asking:

"And what device of the Evil One has got the better of thy inexperience?"

Quillian hung his head.

"You have talked with the daughters of men, my son?"

"I have, my Father."

"And you disregarded my counsel, and had no commerce with the uncomely Marthas, as I would have had thee do, but you were attracted by some fair Mary."

Quillian bit his lip.

The Guardian was quick to notice this token of emotion, and went on:

"And how many devils did she harbour in her heart?"

"Not one," declared Quillian stoutly.

"Not one?"

"Not one. She was good and true."

The Guardian took a further pinch of snuff, and went on:

"A good Catholic?"

"No."

"Not?"

"She was a Protestant."

"And her kin were heretics also?"

"And enemies of the Church, my Father."

"And yet——"

"I love her, my Father. And shall until I draw my last breath."

He looked for reproof of his frowardness; instead, the Guardian gently asked:

"And how did you come to lose her, my son?"

"My Father!" exclaimed Quillian in surprise.

"What now?"

"You are not angry?"

"I love thee, and understand thee, my son. How did you come to lose her?"

"It was all blundering on my part."

"Which it is too late to repair?"

"Too late: too late!"

"She is married to another?"

"Even so, my Father."

The Guardian sighed: took more snuff; and said in something of the manner of a man of the world:

"And what are your plans for the future?"

"I have no plans."

"No definite desire in your heart?"

"None."

"Then why have you sought me out?"

"To see you, my Father."

"For that I am right glad. You have often been in my thoughts; and I have never left you out of my prayers. And you had no other design in coming to me?"

Quillian hesitated, before replying:

"From time to time I have had thoughts of returning whence I came."

"And now?"

"I cannot make up my mind."

He expected the Guardian would urge him to take up the life he had broken on his departure from the monastery, and was surprised to hear him speak of alien matters: to these he gave indifferent heed; his mind was troubled by the impression he had received on the platform at Roulers, and in the streets of Ypres, of the nearness of Vesper.

There was no possibility of her being in such an out-of-the-way place, he told himself; and put down his fancies to an imagination that had been disordered by all he had gone through.

For a space Quillian was opening his eyes at the Guardian's behaviour: he had always venerated him in the old days for his piety and wisdom; consequently he was greatly surprised to find the ecclesiastical Superior forgotten in the boon companion the Guardian took it on himself to be: but for his Franciscan robe, he might have been a jolly man of the world.

The latter put aside what duties might have been his, and insisted on Quillian's dining (it might have been a special feast-day for the abundance of wines and meats set before them) and spending the evening with him.

He talked of a thousand and one secular things, on which he exhibited intimate knowledge; told the drollest stories; and was disappointed his guest did not follow his example.

There was a matter that particularly delighted the

Guardian: he spoke of a certain elderly lady, a member of one of Belgium's aristocratic families, who had been an inmate of a convent for over twenty years: she had become interested in some charity for succouring the submerged, and in order to further the good work, she had received a dispensation from Rome to renounce her vows.

After leaving the convent, she had become infatuated with one of those she had assisted; he was twenty years of age and was a butcher by trade: she had married him in face of all opposition, and she and her husband had opened a small butcher's shop at Mons.

These proceedings had caused such a scandal that her highly placed relations had used their influence, with the result that the marriage had been annulled, and the former nun had been packed off to her convent, where she would spend the rest of her days.

Although the Guardian had told the story many times already, he roared with laughter after he had done, and took numberless pinches of snuff.

After a while, Quillian merely heard snatches of his host's conversation: the wine had mounted to his brain and stimulated errant fancies: he again saw someone very like Vesper in the door of a waiting-room at Roulers; and the footsteps he had heard without the monastery haunted him until they beat persistently, rhythmically on his brain: he bitterly, bitterly regretted he had not troubled to discover whom they belonged to.

For a time he was his normal self; and the conversation took a more intimate turn; the Guardian insensibly led him to unburden himself of his sorrows; little by little, he confessed his heart to the other's sympathetic understanding, including his self-deception in seeking to pluck but one brand from the burning.

"At least, my dear young friend, you have learned the folly of regretting what cannot be undone!" said the Guardian, after he had done.

"I know the foolishness of it in my heart."

"But the knowledge is not always easy to apply."

"Indeed, no."

"What of cold water!"

Quillian smiled wanly.

"And prayer?"

"I have prayed."

"And abstinence!"

"I have fasted: that, and even the early Fathers, have failed me."

The Guardian reflected, before saying:

"Has it never occurred to you that in some ways you have been blessed?"

"My Father!"

"With your wealth of inexperience, you might have loved and wedded a woman who had not seven but ten thousand devils in her heart: who would have ruined and disgraced you, and have brought you to despair."

"Still——"

"I have not done. Say that you had married your paragon." (Quillian shifted on his chair.) "From what I know of the world, matrimony has a cruel knack of showing the sawdust with which the heart's idol is stuffed."

"But——"

"A Frenchman has said that marriage is the tomb of love; and is it not one of your countrymen—Pope, I think—who has written that 'directly a man knows a woman he ceases to respect her?'"

The mere thought of applying such devilish aphorisms to the peerless Vesper filled Quillian with a dumb resentment.

The Guardian looked pityingly on the young face on which sorrow had set its ineffaceable seal, and went on:

"And that being the case, is it not a thousand times better that a man should run no risk of disillusionment, and thus always be enabled to treasure his ideal?"

Quillian found his tongue.

"You don't know of whom you're speaking!" he cried.

"My son!"

"You don't know of whom you're speaking!" repeated Quillian vehemently. "If you were anyone else, I should tell you you were blaspheming!"

"Is—is she so much to you?" asked the Guardian gently.

"A touch of her hand, and I was in heaven."

"Even so?"

"And wanted nothing more on earth."

"My son! My son!"

"It's nothing but the truth."

"It grieves me to see thee like this, and for a woman."

"Why do you speak slightly of her?"

"She has made thee sad. You were born for better things."

"Better things! I am not worthy of her."

"Pooh!"

"I am not worthy: I am not worthy!" repeated Quillian in all sincerity.

"So you may believe now, but——"

"Why! It was remembering how nobly she behaved on a certain occasion which saved me from grievous sin!"

"A woman behave nobly!"

"Why not?"

"Surely her interests were not concerned!"

"They were, and keenly."

"I should like to hear."

Quillian was nothing loath to impress on the Guardian that Vesper was quite different from any other woman who ever lived: he forthwith told him (he had not done so before) of Vesper's honesty on the night of her visit to his flat.

After he had done, the Guardian was silent, until he said:

"Tell me, my son; was she a good cook?"

"That I do not know."

"For if she were, my son, and had I been in your shoes, I should have taken care not to lose her."

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE JOURNEY'S END

QUILLIAN stood on the Admiralty Quay at Dover.

It was another such a day as that a year ago when, on much the same spot, he had been a trifle ashamed of his frank enjoyment of the May sunshine.

But this time the youth of the year did not get into his blood and make it dance in his veins; neither was he held by the profusion of blue in sea and sky: the greyness of his mood discoloured the world, and however gladly it might pipe its song of Spring, there was no response in his heart.

He had slept in the cell he had formerly occupied, and had not been disturbed by the memories that clung to the place: sleeping or waking, echoes of the footfalls he had heard without the monastery had throbbed in his brain; and in his dreams, he was treading the path they marked out, which ascended to dizzy heights of happiness.

On being called by a friar knocking on his door, and crying "Laudetur Jesus Christus," he had responded "Amen," and had more than ever regretted he had not discovered who was responsible for those haunting footsteps.

He had had permission to go to the chapel for 'Matins and Lauds,' where he had gazed with rapt eyes at the representation of St. Teresa above the high altar.

The cold resemblance she bore to the adored one had inflamed the love in his heart: he had been unable to pray; his one desire had been to return to England, and to places identified with Vesper.

He had had word with the Guardian before coming away: the latter had told him that, since he had coveted

a daughter of Eve, it was not in his blood to take up his old life at the monastery; and had wished him God-speed.

The greyness possessing him now he was no longer cheered by the Guardian's fellowship; his lack of purpose; the ever-present hungering for what might have been, made him almost wish he had never been born: there would have been no doubt about this, had it not been for the reflection that, in this case, his eyes would never have been gladdened by a sight of Vesper.

He would have given all he had, and very many years of his life, to have the past twelve months over again, together with the knowledge that was now his.

But the moving finger of his trumpery fate had written; and all the regrets, and all the heart-burnings were of no avail to wipe out a letter of what had been set down: and so far as Vesper was concerned, all he had to look forward to was the chance of meeting her again and learning she was happy.

Perhaps the sea, and sky, and sunshine infected him with some of their wholesome philosophy; in a very little while he was more resigned to the trend of events, and took a sadly sweet consolation in reflecting that sorrow imparted a dignified detachment to those it marked out for its own, and gave them a subtle understanding denied to the heedless ruck.

It was as though the events of a year back were being repeated, for Quillian heard someone behind him: doubtless a porter, who had come to tell him the train was about to start, he reflected, until he was pulled up short at realizing they were of a piece with the footsteps that had come to his ears while waiting without the friary.

He turned sharply, and his heart seemed to come up in his throat: Vesper stood before him.

For some moments, he feared his imagination had done him a disservice: but there was no doubting it was she, even if she had lost something of the bloom of youth: as if to make absolutely certain, he was so bold as to touch her with a trembling finger.

Her eyes sought his, before dropping them: they stood together in a silence he tried in vain to break.

A porter shouted to them, and they hurried in the direction of the train, where Quillian got his bag from the man who had had it passed by the Customs.

"Travelling with the lady, sir?"

Quillian was too dazed by Vesper's unaccountable appearance to reply; they were bundled into the same compartment as the train began to move.

The seats were full with the exception of two; these were taken by Vesper and Quillian, who were on opposite sides, and by no means facing each other.

For a considerable fraction of the two hours' journey to London, Quillian sat in a stupor; a stupor that was infrequently illumined by intervals of comparative understanding; at these times he did not seek to comprehend the whys and wherefores of it all: he was trying to realize that Vesper had seen him; had approached him; and was journeying by the same train, and the same compartment, to town.

He wondered if she had come by his boat from Ostend; if so, why had he been such a fool as to remain in the cabin he had taken, and thus have missed her.

He fell to glancing at her with increasing frequency; she was very white, and seemed held by no common emotion.

And as the train ruthlessly devoured the ridiculously few miles separating them from London, he knew a great fear with regard to what would happen at the journey's end.

Even if she were not met by the man to whom she was flesh of his flesh, London would swallow her up, and he would see her no more.

This apprehension more and more dominated him; the outposts of the great city were as the gates of hell.

He again beheld her, and for a long time; he was more than ever conscious of the pallor of her skin, and a poor-ness of outline, which it was hard to identify with her luxurious lot.

Horrible thoughts seared his brain; she was unhappy; might be ill-treated; and he could do nothing.

He wished he could gaze steadfastly into her eyes, for only by so doing could he learn if anything serious were

amiss: but she would not turn in his direction; she appeared to be staring before her without seeing anything.

He was despairing of lessening his ignorance concerning her, when she gazed at him and with a shy, soft glance, which fired his blood, and made him curse the progress of that pitiless train.

He was minded to go to her and ask her a thousand things; he was withheld by the presence of the others in the compartment; they were elderly women who were consumed with curiosity regarding them.

The train drew up at Victoria, and Quillian's heart seemed, also, to have come to a stop: he fearfully scanned the platform in order to discover whomsoever might be waiting to rob him of Vesper.

He was thankful to see that there was no one about whom he recognized; and on opening the door for her to alight, he perceived that all she had with her was a small bag: doubtless her luggage was registered.

They stood on the platform in an indecision that was contrasted with the hurrying passengers; the shouting porters: Quillian tried to appreciate the moments that were left to him of her.

Again he strove to speak; his agitation prevented him: he wondered why she did not make a move.

It was not until they had the platform almost to themselves, that he faltered:

"What about your luggage?"

"I have none," she replied in the well-remembered voice which stirred him to the marrow.

"Not?"

Vesper shook her head.

"Which—which way are you going?" was his next question: he waited in an agony of suspense for her reply.

"I don't know."

"Not?"

"Not yet."

They involuntarily, and very slowly, walked in the direction of the barrier; after they had given up the tickets, they lingered much as they had done on the platform.

And as they stood in the station, it was transformed to Quillian, for, instead of the bookstalls, and all the paraphernalia of a terminus, he saw only the desire of his eyes; the home they had made on the tiny oasis; the yellow sands which stretched away till they were at one with the sky.

He and she lived in a world of delights, where there was no thought for the morrow; where travail and pain were not; and their hearts sang with gladness.

Vesper's voice brought him sharply back to the ill-starred present.

"Don't you want anything?" she asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Tea or——"

"No. Do you?"

"No."

A further silence was broken by his saying:

"I suppose you must be going?"

"I suppose so. And you?"

"I suppose so," he sighed.

They left the station, and lingered again outside: whatsoever they had in mind was resolved by the driving up of a taxi-cab; and by an officious porter, who opened the door in front of them.

Vesper gave an address in a low voice to the driver, and got in: Quillian, who was held by a passionate anxiety not to lose sight of her, followed: the next thing he was sensible of was that they were moving quickly along Victoria Street.

Until he made this discovery, he had been curious with regard to whither she was bound: henceforth, he did not care one bit; with a prodigal abandonment to the joy of the moment, all he was alive to was the fact of his being with his love, and that he had her quite to himself.

His hand sought hers, and she did not withdraw it; the physical contact intoxicated his senses: he lay back in the cab, and surrendered to romantic fancies which were the more delicious after all he had endured.

No longer was he riding in a hired cab with a young woman who belonged to someone else, and whom he

would soon lose sight of for good: he was a fairy Prince who had won his Princess; and they were being drawn by flower-bedecked horses along a flower-strewn road to his realm of delight, where happiness lasted for ever, and never turned to ashes in the mouth.

The houses and streets were decorated in their honour, and as they passed the thousands who had come out to greet and envy them, the magic of their presence effaced the lines of care on their subjects' faces: the sick were made whole; and hearts that had been heavy rejoiced.

It never once occurred to Quillian to question Vesper; sufficient for the moment was the ecstasy thereof; his happiness was such that he was certain that life at its worst could not be so brutal as to cut it short.

He infrequently dared to glance at his fairy bride: she was sitting much as she had done in the train; her face was paler than ever, if that were possible; she was staring before her with unseeing eyes: she might almost have been turned into stone were it not for the trembling of her long, dark eyelashes.

Then, as they journeyed onward, the streets became more crowded; the traffic thicker: Quillian made some sort of effort to come to grips with facts as they were, and all he could arrive at was that he was, somehow, in London, a London that differed vastly from the wilderness he had left a few hours back.

In seeking to divine the alteration, he turned to the window, whereupon Vesper's hand tightened in his, and he was once more held by his fancies: his heart sang, and with a gladness he had not thought it possible for mortal to enjoy; a gladness that would last for ever.

The cab was stopped by the press of vehicles and, for a moment, the song ceased: the next, he was back in the realms of make-believe; they were waiting to change horses.

Once more they were off, and although there was a sharp declension in the prosperity of the streets, Quillian only saw flowers; they were piled in big nosegays, house-high, on either side; the odours they scattered were like the scent of his beloved's hair.

He was lost to all sense of his surroundings; and was

as one on the borderland of an exquisite dream, who was aware that, even if he awakened, reality would be quite as delicious.

The cab pulled up with a jerk that startled Quillian from his dream: he dared not wonder what would happen next.

"We get out here," said Vesper.

Quillian alighted, and was brutally aroused to a knowledge of things as they were on finding himself in a squalid, Camden Town street, where the tallness of the houses called attention to their naked and unashamed decay.

It was deserted, save for one or two down-at-heel people; even the air seemed to taste of the undeviating flatness of the inhabitants' lives.

He saw that Vesper was looking in her purse for money to pay the driver; forestalling her, he gave the astonished driver a handful of money.

"You shouldn't have done that!" she said.

"Why not?"

"You should have let me pay."

"But—but——"

"But what?"

"I'm trying to understand."

"This is where I live."

"Where you live!"

"Would you like to come in?"

"Yes, but——"

"You were always a 'yes, but.' I'll see if it's all right upstairs. Then you may understand."

There was a length of frowsy grass between the railings and the house; he followed her along this, and up the steep steps to the door; this she opened with a key.

"I won't keep you a minute," she said.

He would have detained her, but she disappeared from his ken into the gloom of the passage, which was noisome with the sour reek begotten of the cooking of countless lodgers' meals.

Quillian was dazed by the turn of events; so far as he could think at all, the only thing he could get hold of was that existence in this unspeakable street had nothing in common with the wife of Lord Tayne.

A vista of an exquisite possibility opened before his eyes; fearing to dwell upon it in a life that was crowded with heartbreaking disappointments, he was regretting he had not questioned Vesper, and had arrived at the truth of things, when the clanging of the gate was followed by approaching footsteps.

He turned, and found himself facing one who was like and yet unlike Grumby; unlike, because he looked more purposeful and more responsible than he had been in the old days.

"Bless my soul, sir, is that you?" said Grumby on catching sight of Quillian.

"It is you, Grumby?"

"That it is, sir. To think I should see you again!"

"Do you live here?"

"Yes, sir, worse luck."

"Then you can tell me——"

"And to-day's a feast-day, sir, as, of course, you're aware."

"Miss Hemmingay that was——"

"It's St. Didymus, sir——"

"I know, but——"

"And the changes that have taken place!"

"Yes, yes——"

"And all for the worse, sir. Things have happened dreadful."

"What do you mean?" asked Quillian quickly; he thought the other might be referring to Vesper.

"I have to work now, sir; work regular," groaned Grumby.

"But Miss Hemmingay! Tell me if——"

"Is that you, Grumby?" cried a well-remembered voice from the basement door.

"Yes, my dear," humbly replied the man addressed.

"Jess you come down at once: you're two minutes late."

Quillian glanced down, and recognized the face of Mrs. Gassmann; it was distorted with anger.

"Must go, sir; the missus," explained Grumby.

"You married Mrs. Gassmann?"

"Yes, worse luck."

"What?"

"Now I have to work; work 'ard for a living. Serves me right for marrying a damned Protestant."

Quillian's ears were assailed by a continuous wrangling below (Grumby seemed to be getting the worst of it) until his heart was gladdened by hearing footsteps descending the stairs, and by Vesper's voice saying:

"You can come up now."

Scarcely knowing what he was doing, he followed her up the ill-carpeted stairs, and into a room on the first floor, where a bowl of wallflowers, a typewriter, and a pile of manuscript on a table were the most conspicuous things among the dreary furniture.

Vesper had taken off her hat and gloves, and Quillian's eyes at once sought the fingers of her left hand, in order to see if she wore a wedding-ring: to his unspeakable delight they were innocent of decoration.

He was overborne by a scrupulosity that was assisted by Vesper's behaviour: she did not speak; and did not once glance towards him; she stood as one forlorn by the mantelshelf.

Quillian gazed long at her; but she did not move: it was only upon his emotion getting the better of him that he went over to, and faced, her.

He strove to voice his heart: all he could say was:

"Vesper! Vesper!"

The pain in his voice awoke her to life.

She trembled; glanced at him with no remarkable expression in her eyes; looked away; and again met his gaze, this time with a steadfast helplessness.

Then, as if moved by a common purpose, they put out their arms to each other.

Their lips were about to meet, when she drew back; a disconcerting hardness came into her face.

"Vesper! Vesper!" he cried.

"Tell me one thing," she returned breathlessly.

"Yes?"

"Have you ever kissed Mrs. Chatillon?"

"But——"

"Have you ever kissed that Mrs. Chatillon? Tell me—I must know."

"No."

"Swear!"

"But——"

"Swear: swear!" she cried vehemently.

"I swear."

Vesper sighed a deep content: her eyes and lips melted into a surpassing tenderness.

The next thing Quillian was conscious of was that she had wound her arms about his neck, and had drawn his lips to hers.

CHAPTER XXIX

THEN AND NOW

THE room that Quillian tried to get at the Grosvenor Hotel had just been taken: he must have made some sort of appeal to the lady clerk he spoke to, for she persuaded the man to whom it had been allotted that it had been given to him in mistake.

Quillian thanked and tipped her handsomely; and was thus enabled to indulge his desire to pass his last night of celibacy in the room he had slept in on first coming to London.

It presented the same barren formality to his interested gaze: after he had vainly sought to contrast the mental outlooks of his two widely separated tenancies, he sat on the bed and was borne on the current of his thoughts.

His bride of to-morrow—their abounding love for each other was the source of this flow; he tried, with poor success, to go over in his mind the succession of incidents which led up to his present felicity.

The fact of their meeting on the Admiralty pier at Dover had by no manner of means been the affair of chance it had appeared on the face of it: his great good fortune had been entirely owing to the kindly offices of Mrs. Lownes, who, on learning that Vesper could not find it in her heart to marry Lord Tayne, had made the former's acquaintance, and had waited for an opportunity to bring her and Quillian together: hence her letter asking him to let her know the day he was crossing the Channel.

And it had been Vesper whom he had caught sight of on the platform at Roulers; it had been her footsteps he had heard on waiting to be admitted to the monastery: fearing a repulse, she had lacked courage to address him.

Other things he had ascertained about her—these less

directly—were that there had been a terrible upset with her father at her flying in the face of Providence, as he had called it, in giving up Lord Tayne; he had refused to live with his daughter, and she had been compelled to augment the tiny income she inherited from her mother by type-writing: she would have been hard put to it to make ends meet, had it not been for the forbearance of Mrs. Grumby, with whom she had lodged.

It had been much of an effort to raise the return fare to Ypres; she had stoutly refused Mrs. Lownes' offers of assistance; and had resolved that, if she went, it would be with her own money.

Quillian had written to thank Mrs. Lownes for having played *dea ex machina* in his affairs: he had received a characteristic reply, telling him that, since she owed him a grudge for the way he had behaved to Mercia (who was thinking of taking vows), and since the gods punish men by giving them their desires, she was paying him out by what she had done.

Quillian, who could have hugged Mrs. Lownes for her abiding concern for his happiness, had at once set about arranging to marry Vesper as soon as may be.

He would have wedded her off-hand (Vesper would have been nothing loth) had it not been necessary for her to be prepared for her reception into the bosom of the Church—an indispensable preliminary to their becoming man and wife.

The priest, who had instructed her, had been loud in his praises of the rapid progress she had made.

And as Quillian sat in the formal hotel bedroom in the darkening spring evening, his mind dwelt on his recent, and last, parting from Vesper.

She had not liked his going to an hotel at all: he might see someone he preferred to her, she had told him, and had said that hotels were always catching fire: if it had not been for fear of not looking her best on the morrow, her anxiety for anything untoward befalling him would keep her awake all night.

If he saw anyone very alluring, he was instructed to think hard of his sweetheart: and he was to fly for his life on the first alarm of fire, and without thought for anyone else.

She had given him the softest of glances; the most lingering of kisses: he did not know even now how he had torn himself away.

This brought him to the contemplation of her fairness, so far as he could carry it in his mind.

After all she had gone through, it was small matter for wonder that she was looking poorly on the day he had met her again: but happiness, and freedom from the necessity of taking economic thought for the morrow, had wrought a wondrous change: her features had softened; her wonderful eyes had become more wonderful than they had ever been, if that were possible; and there were tones of her voice which almost brought a lump to his throat.

And if the change in her appearance were remarkable, even more surprising was the alteration in her spirits.

She was alive with an irresponsible light-heartedness which found expression in unnumbered sallies and a thousand pretty ways; things that made Quillian completely her slave.

There were exceptions to her levity, exceptions that revealed barely suspected emotional deeps, and told him in no uncertain voice how much he was to her.

The suddenness with which Quillian had been raised from the abysses of despair to the heights of an almost delirious happiness had put an edge on his devotional bias, which had been blunted by his familiarity with sorrow: this was why he was frequently taken aback by a material outlook Vesper often betrayed.

To-night, and in spite of a disposition (inspired by her last kiss) to think her perfect, insurgent recollections came into his mind, and would not be denied.

When he had gently broached the subject of her conversion, he had expected searchings of conscience.

"That's all right," she had replied, and off-handedly.

"But——"

"But what?" she had asked in surprise.

"Aren't you going to give such a serious matter thought?"

"The only thing I'm worrying about is whether this hat makes me look green."

"Yes, dearest, but——"

"Good old 'yes but.' Don't worry your head about trifles. I'd beat a tambourine; and wear a Salvation bonnet—even smash windows—if it brought me nearer to you."

He had become reflective, and she had said:

"Surely you're not worrying about hereafter and all that—that sort of thing! The present is good enough for me. And do you know why?"

"Tell me."

"Because it's the nearest you and I shall ever get to heaven."

Another time she had said:

"What do you think Father Cave wanted me to believe to-day?"

"Something for your soul's good, sweetheart."

"He expects me to believe the world was actually made in seven days."

"It's an article of the Catechism."

"What happens if I don't—can't believe it?"

"If you cannot believe with the faith of a little child, you had better refer your difficulties to Father Cave."

"What'd be the use? He as good as said the other day that it was well for me I was 'going over'; otherwise, I shouldn't have an 'earthly' of salvation."

Quillian had been silent, and she had continued:

"Imagine believing I'd go to hell on a twopenny-farthing difference of doctrine! I almost told him I'd been there already."

"Dearest!"

"Nothing could be worse than existing, for that's all it was, on eighteen shillings a week; gnawing my heart out for love of you; and knowing I was getting plainer every day."

Later she had asked:

"How often is it necessary to go to confession?"

"At least four times a year," he had told her.

"Won't I make Father Cave's hair stand on end—at least, what there is of it!"

"Dearest!"

"It's time he knew what life was, and—and—— What are you staring like that for?"

"At what you said."

"Sorry! I'm afraid I've a perverted sense of humour."

"How are you getting on with your studies—with Father Cave, I mean?"

"Famously. I say, 'yes, yes, yes' to everything he says; and all the time I'm thinking of what I'm to wear on our honeymoon."

"But, sweetheart——"

"Don't you worry about that. I know what suits me; and I'm going to make you proud of me; and love me ever so much."

"I love you for your wayward self," he had told her.

"Any fool of a woman can win a man: it's the wise woman who keeps him all to herself," she had replied.

More of apiece with this declaration was something that had occurred a week back; he had forgotten it till now.

It was the day she had explained something he had hitherto failed to understand—this, why she had been so elated at learning of his engagement to Mercia.

She had taken to him in the Fulham Road, she had told him, when something had urged her to look round, and she had seen him behind: he had more than captured her imagination upon his calling at the hospital; and she had behaved coldly to him, as she did not want her father to take advantage of his (Quillian's) undoubted interest in her.

As for her reception of the news of his betrothal, she had been both pleased and depressed: her gaiety had been largely forced in order to conceal her chagrin.

Quillian had been silent; his thoughts for once were concerned with the Mercia to whom he had behaved so ill; so far as his surpassing happiness would permit, he wondered how much her heart was bruised by his behaviour.

Vesper had noticed his abstraction, and had sharply asked:

"What are you thinking of?"

Before he could reply, she had added: "Were you thinking of that Mrs. Chatillon?"

"No, Vesper."

"If you were——"

"But, dearest——"

"How I hate that woman!"

"She was a very good friend to me."

"Nice friend! Couldn't you see she was head over ears in love with you and trying to get you for herself?"

"Mrs. Chatillon was——"

"Don't speak of her, and never mention her again. I hate her; hate her; hate her!" she had declared hotly.

Quillian had been astonished by Vesper's vehemence; he had looked in surprise, that was not unmingled with admiration, at the fire in her eyes; the colour on her cheeks; the quivering of her lips: before he could say anything, she had gone on:

"Let me say this, and get it over; and if you take it to heart, we'll get along swimmingly:—You keep to me, and I'll be ever such a darling. But once you run after another woman, I'll be a little devil!"

"I'm not likely to, dearest. I love and want you alone."

"But you don't know what devils some women can be. Any man's fair game to them, and if he's——"

Seeing the perplexity that came over his face, she had broken off, come over to him, and repeatedly kissed his lips and his eyes; had told him he was everything in the world to her; and that she wished he was poor, so that she might work for him.

It was her imperfections that made her so human, he told himself; and it was this humanity that made her so exquisitely lovable.

Quillian was startled by a knock on the door; he went to it, to learn he was wanted on the telephone; he was seized with a great fear, and as he went down the stairs, the dread thought came to him that the Fates had repented of the kindness they had lately shown him, and that something untoward had happened to his sweetheart: he trembled in every limb as he put the receiver to his ear.

"Who is it?" he asked in a voice he strove to control.

"Is that my Paul?" returned Vesper's voice, whereupon an immense load was lifted from his heart.

"Thank God!" he exclaimed fervently.

"Do you mind my ringing you up?"

"Delighted, dearest. Before I knew it was you, I feared something had happened to you."

"Then you have thought of me?"

"Of course."

"Much?"

"You're never out of my mind. I couldn't think of anything else if I were wicked enough to try."

"And you're quite all right?"

"Quite. And you?"

"And you haven't seen anyone nicer than me?"

"Not yet."

"Go straight to bed, and then you won't."

"I was just going. Have you been thinking of me?"

"Occasionally."

"Is that all?"

"Once or twice, then. And—Paul!"

"Yes, Vesper."

"Don't forget to-morrow."

"I'll try not to."

"That's a good boy. I thought I'd have twopenn'rth to remind you."

"It was very sweet of you."

"Sure you're all right?"

"Sure."

"You're not sorry it's all fixed up?"

"Not very."

"Neither am I—at least, not very. Now go to bed, sweetheart, and dream of me."

"Good-night, my Vesper."

"Is that all?"

"We're on the telephone, and——"

"Who cares! Do who's listening good."

"Good-night, my darling: and God bless you."

"I only want you to bless me. Good-night, my Paul."

"Vesper!"

"Yes, dearest!"

"Is that all?"

"For to-night. Are you there?"

"Yes—yes."

"It is you?"

"Don't you know my voice?"

"Listen; I'm going to whisper something."

"Yes—yes."

Quillian strained his ears, and just heard:

"I love you: I love you."

Back in the seclusion of his room, Quillian's mind dwelt on a recent visit to his home, where this time to-morrow he would be with his bride.

He had gone to the room that would be theirs; the room he had almost fearfully entered after dining with the Philbricks.

Vesper had told him that wallflowers were her favourite flowers; he had seen to it that his gardens were full of them; and that they were of every obtainable hue.

And as he had gazed from a window, and listened to the stream-music, the wallflowers had thrown up their scent to where he stood, and delighted his nostrils: he had hoped they would keep their richest fragrance for the morrow.

It was always sweet to linger in a garden with the woman one loved, he reflected: and they would watch the year's procession of flowers, which would bloom the fairer in memory of the time the newly made man and wife had first stood together at the window.

Nor was this all.

In the days to come, when the passing of many processions of flowers had whitened their hair and ripened their love, they would do as his father and mother had done, and walk in the gardens at sunset-time with their arms about each other.

Quillian's heart leapt at the feast of happiness which was so bounteously provided.

There was no doubt of it all now: the cup of his bliss was full to the brim; and promised to remain so.

She was his; and he hers: and so long as God's blessing rested on them, nothing else mattered.

Before Quillian got into bed, he knelt and prayed long for Vesper; that her days should be long; that his lifelong devotion should smooth the rough places in her pathway.

It was some time before he fell asleep: as on the first occasion of his resting in that room, his mind was filled by

a curious sense of expectation, much as though something untoward were about to happen.

He had not drawn the blind, and his eyes were arrested by a bit of the glare of the great city: the roar of the traffic was borne to his ears until (this had happened before) both the glare and the roar increased tenfold.

Now it seemed to his tense apprehensions that the glare came from the mouth of the Pit: the roar of the traffic was as the murmurings of the unmeasured, immeasurable pain of the world that seethed without the window.

Quillian was held by a great fear; not for himself, but for the woman he loved.

He feared their adorable absorption in each other would not assist to save her soul alive: he doubted his competency to prevent her voice from contributing to the clamour of those in travail.

The impressions of fire and torment faded from his ken, but a sense of apprehension remained.

His condition of mind was akin to that in which he had sometimes lain awake as a little child, possessed by a nervous dread of the Powers of Darkness.

And once more, as in those far-away days, he shut his eyes and sought to comfort himself by repeating all but forgotten doggerels which, once more, came trippingly to his tongue.

The first was taught him by a sailor uncle, who had retired from the Navy, and who was happy with his astronomical telescope which was fitted with a speculum.

The rhyme was as follows:

‘The Ram, the Bull, the Heavenly Twins;
And next the Crab the Lion shines,
The Virgin and the Scales;
The Scorpion, Archer, and He-Goat;
The Man who carries the Watering Pot;
The Fish with glittering tails.’

The first verse and refrain of ‘Primrose Farm,’ the song his mother sang to his father, came into his mind; he said it to himself as before:

' She sat at quiet Primrose Farm
 In the old oak parlour dim,
 While out of the window one little arm
 Leant down the flow'rs to trim.
 He opened the wicket; he loved her so:
 He asked her his bride to be.
 ' There's someone else,' she answered low,
 And her tears fell silently.

' For some must love, and some must wait :
 And some must find their love too late.'

This was followed by a country rhyme taught him by an old nurse:

' If the geese don't lay
 By Candlemas Day,
 Cut off their heads
 And throw them away.'

Then, other sea-faring doggerels he had learned from his sailor uncle:

' If to starboard red appear,
 It's your duty to keep clear;
 To act as judgment says is proper;
 " Port " or " Starboard," " Astern " or " Stop her."'

' If upon your port is seen
 A steamer's starboard light of green;
 There is not much for you to do :
 Green to red keeps clear of you.

' Green to green, red to red,
 Perfect safety; go ahead.'

Lastly, a simple prayer he had learned by heart at his mother's knee: this he slightly altered, so that it might embrace his Vesper:

' Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John,
 Bless the bed We lie upon.
 Four angels to guard Our bed,
 Two at the foot and two at the head;
 Two to watch Us while We pray,
 And two to carry Our souls away.'

Five minutes later, Paul Quillian fell asleep.

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